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HIGH SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

A disturbing novel of today's
teen-age delinquents

based on the powerful
MGM motion picture release —
an Albert Zugsmith production.



MORTON
COOPER

FIRST DAY IN SCHOOL

No one would ever forget Tony Baker's first day in Santa Bello High School. By the time classes were dismissed at three o'clock, Tony had:

- Grimly terrorized a fellow-student: "You got 32 teeth. You want to try for none?"
- Brazenly greeted his pretty young English teacher: "You belong in my class, doll."
- Suggestively told the campus heart-throb: "Hi, sexy! You look real cultured."
- Sneeringly retorted to the principal: "You're dragging your rear axle in waltz time."

Indeed, by the end of that day, tough Tony Baker was the talk of the Santa Bello Campus.

But there were plenty of others—including the hot-rodding Wheelers and Dealers—who were girding to put Tony in his place. And they had the muscle and manpower to do it.

Tony Baker's *second* day at Santa Bello High was destined to be even more interesting and explosive than the first!

Based on the powerful MGM motion picture release
HIGH SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

Starring

RUSS JAN JOHN DREW DIANE
TAMBLYN STERLING BARRYMORE JERGENS

with guest stars

MAMIE JACKIE CHARLES
VAN DOREN COOGAN CHAPLIN, JR.

HIGH SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

Novelization by Morton Cooper

*Based upon the screenplay by Lewis
Meltzer and Robert Blee. Screen
story by Robert Blee*

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THE SANTA BELLO morning was clean and crisp as the first hot rods began to drive up to the school's parking lot. The warm sun was unveiled and sensual, lending an easy-going aura of lassitude. But Robinson knew it belied the tension which already had begun to mount.

Walter Robinson stood at his office window, as he did every school morning before nine, and watched the lot gradually fill. He had been principal of Santa Bello High for twenty-four years—next November would make it an even quarter century, and there was some rumbling within the hierarchy of the school board that he would be given one of those appreciated but invariably dull testimonials—and he tried to remember when he'd last been openly proud of the job he was doing. Once, maybe not too long ago at that, there had been an almost tactile thrill in unlocking the door to his unpretentiously paneled office, as though each morning carried with it a challenge, addressed privately to him. In those days (*when? when? how long ago?*) he had been able to take pride in his responsibilities as an administrator, and even as a friend to the thousands of youngsters who threaded past him each day.

But something had made it all change. He was the principal of one of the most attractive, most up-to-date public high schools in this part of California, and he still dealt with kids who would turn into excellent citizens. In the earlier, so much younger years, the good kids had been able to outshine the rotten apples, just by moving over the grounds.

But it wasn't that way any longer, and there was nothing he really could do about it.

Maybe I'm just getting old, he thought. Maybe the guard isn't up as much as it used to be. Maybe I'm fifteen years behind the times and I refuse to face the fact that times do change, and that kids change with them.

No, he thought. No, that was no answer. It wasn't that easy, not if you still wanted to think of yourself as doing a useful job.

You could keep shifting blames from one source to another, the way everyone else was doing, but you had to reach a point of coming to honest grips with yourself, and of whether or not you were really doing your duties.

A small percentage of Santa Bello High girls used to be pregnant before graduation day. Now a growing number of them were carrying even before the end of their freshman years.

Here and there some boys had been found with a pair of brass knuckles in their pockets. Now you searched them and discovered switch blade knives.

A wave of wine drinking had once spread through a segment of the students. Now you would settle for that again. Now they used marijuana. And worse.

He no longer was concerned with the worry of where it would end. More important now was the question of where and how and why it had begun, and of what he had not done to help prevent it.

The office door opened and his secretary scurried in. She had scurried like that, like a charading old maid, since the day she had come to work for him nearly twenty years ago.

"Miss Perry from home ec just phoned," she reported, in an unpleasant, crotchety tone which suggested that Santa Bello High was facing a major crisis; he had noticed lately that Miss Dodge couldn't even report that it was beginning to rain any more without making the report sound as if Noah and his company were on their way. "She won't be able to teach any of her classes today. She said she woke up with a high temperature and she tried to get dressed, but she feels she can't make it. I *told* her this certainly was a fine time to phone and let us know, that—"

"All right," Robinson said softly, taking his chair.

"—that she should have thought of telephoning long before this. After all, we have—"

"All *right*, Miss Dodge," he repeated, a little more firmly this time. "Bring me the sub list and we'll get right to work."

He felt uncommonly tired as he waited for the list, as he waited for the new school day to begin. The complaints and the fights would be brought to his attention today and he wondered how long he'd be up to meeting them. All of the school's halfway serious infractions were brought to him. In the past he always had been able to deal with each one as it came, and Hawkins

from The Board enjoyed saying, "Walt Robinson is the greatest smoother-outer in the entire school system."

But someday, he feared, the smoothing out skill wouldn't be there for him. Only last week he'd read that at Brightdale High, a school with even fewer troublemakers than Santa Bello, a boy had stabbed another boy to death in the gym.

2

It was a quarter of nine when Tony Baker swerved the wheel of his new Chrysler, suddenly and expertly, around the first sunny corner that led to the school grounds. Kids were still loafing outside in clusters, as if they had all the time in the world, but the parking lot was nearly filled.

One boy was aiming his hot rod toward one of the last available spaces, and would have made it easily if Tony, aware that he was being watched by enough of the kids, hadn't pressed hard on the gas. He gave his Chrysler a slooshing sound as it nosed into the space first. The hot rodder screeched brakes and stopped sharply as he yelled, "Hey, wise guy!"

The noisy, abrupt arrival of Tony Baker to Santa Bello High had, in the course of one spectacular minute, served its purpose. As the squeezed-out hot rodder stood on his seat with egg on his enraged face, most of the teen agers who'd seen the nosing job began to edge in and congregate. A few of them were still laughing. Some of the girls, particularly the ones who knew that sweaters hadn't been made just for warmth, were

conscious of Tony as he stepped out of his car, ready to do his big deal battle with the rodder.

Grinning, he waved to the nearest sweater job. His appearance, he knew, couldn't have been planned more perfectly.

"What the hell're you pullin', wise boy?" the rodder shouted, emerging from his heap and slamming the door after him. "I was going to park there."

"The name's Baker, big shot," answered Tony, pretending extreme courtesy as he glanced again at the other kids, happy that his brashness was making a hit. "B-A-K-E-R, see, and if you like, I'll write it down for you. I park where I want."

The rodder still wasn't thoroughly convinced, although he was almost a head shorter than Tony. "That space is mine!"

The contemptuous smile broadened. "You got thirty-two teeth, chief. You want to try for none?"

Regarding the shortie carefully, he waited, poised; his time at Santa Bello, he had decided early this morning, would depend on how he took care of himself right here and now, with everyone watching. Even in a school of more than three thousand kids, few secrets were kept; before the day was out, the whole joint would know that a new guy had joined the school, that he knew how to take care of himself, and that he was angling to take over. You never got to the top by playing the pussyfoot bit, by giving them the watchful waiting routine and making them think you were hesitant about anything at all. The time was now or never, and in spades.

"Who are you?" the rodder asked. He had started

to back down already, although he knew the clusters on hand were aching to see a little harmless blood spill. "I've never seen you around here. You belong to this school?"

"Sure," Tony grinned. "I'm the new sewing instructress; I start on the job today. But that doesn't take care of the situation at hand, chief. Do I start handing you your teeth now, or later?"

It worked. The kid glared for another crucial moment and then, discovering himself outstared, objected with a grim, "Awww-ww," and angrily retreated to his heap. He slid in, backed up his rod, and drove away.

From somewhere in the crowd, someone applauded. Tony beamed, waved paternally and bowed low.

He had arrived. They wouldn't be forgetting him.

The elation of having won the first round was still alive in Tony Baker as the crowd gradually dispersed and he headed for the path leading to the school's main double doors. He was a tall, strikingly handsome young man who felt no sensitivity about looking a year or two older than most of the other obvious seniors; the fact would have rankled back, say, in his father's high school years, but his father had never been interrupted by military service.

Tony's rich black hair made a startling contrast to his almost blindingly white teeth, which promised to be more and more evident today as the morning promised to bring more victories, the kinds that provoked full, shameless smiles. Back home in Chicago he had never had to concern himself with the worry that he mightn't be able to hook onto a girl in a hurry. Glancing

around now, there was no reason to believe that the situation here would be any different from Chicago.

Without appearing to be forcing any issues, he openly liked what he saw of a nearby willowy blonde, one of the truly stacked jobs who'd watched his near bout with Shorty Hot Rod. She was eyeing him, too, a trifle more furtively, as she stood at the side of the path with one of those ra-ra-ra crew cut boys. Ra-ra seemed to be missing nothing of the exchange of looks. He frowned in a way which announced to the world that he wasn't prepared to give up anything he owned without a fight.

Obediently, Tony sidled up to them and wrapped his hand around the blonde's arm.

"Hi, sexy," he greeted. "You look real cultured."

The blonde regarded him critically but, somehow, with a little less surprise than he would have expected. "Let's you and me cut out to some drag-and-eat pad," he went on, and began to walk her away. The crew-cutter wasn't having any of it, though. He spun Tony around and tried to slap the hand away from the arm.

"Beat it," he instructed, with quiet but obvious anger.

"Oh, I dig," Tony grinned. "You maybe want to start a rumble?" Another cluster of kids was gathering around again, once more seeming to guarantee Tony Baker that he wasn't going to get lost in any shuffle. He enjoyed it all, even when Ra-ra ordered him to drop the blonde's hand, even when she released herself from his grasp—casually and without any indication of overly organized dignity.

The crewcutter, contemptuously ignoring Tony, held the girl's arm and said, "Let's go, Joan."

"Oh, it's Joan, huh?" smiled Tony. "Say, Joan, I'm laying it down, but you ain't picking it up, like, doll."

She needn't have even glanced back, of course, but she did. In a voice that sounded mildly strained, she murmured, "Maybe later," just before she continued on her way with the guy. Tony watched with a broadening smile; that was considerably more like it.

From the group who, for the second time, were sent away without witnessing a morning rumble, came a sparrow of a boy who exuded admiration. He touched Tony's sleeve and disclosed, "Hey, man, don't tangle so fast with the President of the Wheelers and Dealers. Man, don't you know that's J. I. Breckenridge? The third, yet?"

"No, man. Didn't know, man. What is he, top stud around here?"

The sparrow laughed. "You just get in with J.I.'s Wheelers and Dealers and you'll be one of the studs yourself. Hyah. I'm Petey Washburn. You new here, huh?"

Tony surveyed him. "New enough," he replied evenly. "And I got news for you, man. Before the crummy day's over, every crummy soul in this crummy school's gonna know who Tony Baker is. I don't join them—they join me. Now are you beamin' me, man?"

"Beamin' bright!" Petey enthused.

"I'm puttin' it down—" Tony began casually.

"And I'm pickin' it up."

They smiled at one another and shook hands. Petey stepped back to let the new man, the big man, the biggest man to hit this drag of a school in a hell of a long time, walk in first.

Tony Baker paused for a flick before entering the principal's office with his credentials, the skillfully phony ones which Mr. Chalmers had personally arranged. "You're going to have to stay on your toes from the moment you get into Santa Bello until the job is done," Mr. Chalmers had warned. "You're to forget you're Sam Graham; from now on your name is Tony Baker and it always has been Tony Baker. You're to cause as much disturbance as possible, and as soon as you can; all the kids in the know at that school should know about you before the end of the very first day, because we can't afford to waste any time. You're not only expected to talk like a bopper, but to think like one, too. It's going to be a dangerous job, Tony Baker, and some people are bound to get hurt—especially you, unless you watch your step through every moment of it. Everything clear?"

Tony slapped Petey Washburn patronizingly on the back and watched the kid leave for a class; Petey would come in handy in time. He listened to the final bell ring for first classes, and lit a cigarillo, tossing the match into the drinking fountain; he noticed with tentative pleasure that his hand hadn't shaken.

Blithely, then, he sauntered toward the door marked Principal's Office and pushed it open. In the office's outer room an aging prune of a secretary stood aghast as she saw the cigarillo.

"Young man," she screeched, hurrying to him and extending her hand. "Give me that!"

He smiled and drew a pack of cigarettes from his denim pockets. "Aw, this weed's too strong for you, baby. How about a Chesterfield?"

As she snatched the thin cigar from him, he smiled innocently and suggested, "What do you say we cut out this jazz, baby, and you tell me where I can find the warden? And if you're a good kid about it, maybe we can neck up a storm later on in my boat. Dig?"

THE NAMEPLATE on her desk announced that her name was Miss Dodge, and it took her a moment or two to regain her composure. "What—do you want here?" she demanded.

"I'm a transfer from North High," Tony notified casually, almost positive that the tremors were still coursing through her reedy body. "I want to join your grand little group."

Studiously avoiding his eyes, Miss Dodge accepted his credentials and took them to her desk. "You live with your aunt and uncle," she read.

"That's the way the bongo bingles," he shrugged and walked closer to her.

"But your scholastic record—" she emphasized, shaking her head as he half sat on the edge of her desk. "It's quite bad."

"So what? I'm no teacher's zombie, cutie."

"This is your *seventh* year in high school! Two years as a junior and three a senior . . ."

Bored, Tony nodded and cut in. "I know, I know. And two years for Samuel the Uncle. Or don't you folks believe in patriotism around here? Let's skip the ancient history, what do you say? What's the scoop now?"

She brought a card out from the top drawer and scribbled something on it—swiftly, as if the most important thing in her life at that moment was to be rid of him as quickly as possible. “Report to your Home Room. Miss Hutchins will tell you where to go from there.”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll tell Miss Hutchins where to go, too.” He took the card, glanced at it critically and crookedly smiled at Miss Dodge, who had rolled her chair back away from him. “Are all the entertainment committee like you, honey?” he inquired. “Not quite with it, like? Slightly oblong?”

It was clear that Miss Dodge was doing her best to be firm, but it was clear, too, that he had successfully managed to frighten her. “If you’re trying to create an impression,” she remarked stiffly, “I’m—unimpressed. Ah—there’s a two dollar deposit for a year’s supply of gym towels.”

“Sure thing,” Tony nodded and pulled out a roll of bills which he purposely had planned to choke a horse named Miss Dodge. It did. She sat up, staring in a kind of restrained awe. “Got change for a twenty?” he asked.

Weakly, she rose and he was afraid she was about to stammer. Recovering, she declared, “I—I think you’d better see our principal, Mr. Robinson—when he returns. He stepped away from his desk for a short while.”

Tony replaced the roll and strolled to the door. “Okay. Just give me a ring, doll,” he asserted lazily. He went through the door, slamming it after him, and gazed around in search of the next world to conquer.

Thirty minutes later, squared away with the full scorecard of his class schedule, he invaded Mrs. Williams' English class on the second floor. She was lecturing from the blackboard behind her desk and she didn't look too many light years away from being a student herself. She was slim and pretty, and her dark eyes were set slightly aslant beneath a shock of auburn hair. He particularly regretted the beef he'd have to cause here.

"Yes?" she greeted, poising her chalk, her face showing an impatient but not unfriendly curiosity.

Pausing comfortably, he lounged against the door and looked over the classroom. In the second row he spotted the stacked blonde named Joan, who obviously spotted him back. Her crew-cut boy was only a few seats away. Tony took his time in surveying the whole picture and then focused his gaze on the teacher. Assuring her that he enjoyed what he saw, he gave her a loud, rudely implicative wolf whistle as he eyed her figure.

Two or three of the kids stifled their giggles but, he observed, most of the others were shocked, prissily dumbfounded, resentful at his intrusion, and even a little horrified. After the initial shock, Mrs. Williams worked for control, but it was certain that she was still carrying her share of the distant drums of anger.

"Do you belong in my class?" she asked, evidently not yet ready to let go with the fire. At that, she was a little more flexible in her movements than Miss Dodge had been.

"Sure," he nodded affably, "and you belong in my class, doll." He chuckled as he heard the expected gasp

chugging up over the class, and he continued. "For a teach', you know, you're a real cool kitten. What do you say we cut out to your pad and live it up a while?" The class was bowling itself over with fascinated indignation as he stalked to her desk with his card; he could see, from the tail of his eye, that the girl called Joan was looking at him in a way different from the others. She was fascinated, too, but not in the sticky, gruesomely pure way they were; the starkly bold way she regarded him announced that he was a breath of fresh air, a cat who would never chicken out into a bore.

In almost a reflex action, the teacher backed away as Tony stood near her. "Take your seat," she said, "and please be quiet."

"Anything for you, doll." He lumbered to the row where the blonde sat, and shoved the kid who occupied the seat next to hers; the kid, obviously unwilling to start anything at this early stage, slid out and found another place as Tony settled. He concentrated on the blonde and called, "Hyah, kitten," then signaled to the teacher, with his thumb touching his forefinger, that everything was strictly copasetic when she reminded him again to be quiet. He slumped in his seat, winked at Joan, and pretended to be just another high school student, eager to absorb some high class learning.

He waited a full three minutes before he broke up the class again. This time he pushed harder than before, intent on being kicked out.

"Hey, doll," he cried, interrupting Mrs. Williams' suddenly nervous lecture on Ben Jonson. "Is that all

you got on the menu for us little boys and girls—broken down poem writers? Why don't we all blow this trap and have us some laughs? We can—"

She really flared now. "Will you *shut* up!" she implored.

Tony shrugged and again slumped in the seat. "Okay, doll. I'll break it off, but it takes a lot out of me."

"And don't you call me 'doll' again! My name is Mrs. Williams."

"Why be so formal, doll?" he baited. "You can call me Tony. Or daddio is even smoother." There was little doubt that the arrogance was making its proposed impact on the class. Grinning, he kept looking about the room to check on the impressions, and he knew his act was going over big.

Mrs. Williams, her voice as sharp as a light footed fury, dropped her chalk onto the desk and said, "I've had enough of this. I—"

Tony rose. "You heard her, everybody. We're through work for the day. Let's graze on some grass."

"You will report to Mr. Robinson at once," she ordered.

Shuffling down the aisle, he offered her his suavest smile. "Slam, bam, thank you, ma'am. Back to the warden's office. You want me to give him any message, doll?"

"For the last time—stop calling me 'doll'!"

At the door, Tony Baker turned to inform her, "I got your signal, clear and cool." Then, for the benefit of the blonde's all-ears boy friend, J.I. Breckenridge, he added, "But you know that's no way to talk to the future president of The Wheelers and Dealers, is it?"

The English class was in a shambles by the time he left, and Mrs. Williams vainly attempted to pick up the pieces.

2

The timing was still going beautifully. Tony was ushered into the principal's office by a wearily shocked Miss Dodge, and he hurriedly lighted another cigarillo before he took the boss's chair and propped his feet up on the desk. As soon as he heard the secretary falteringly confiding in the outer room, "We have a problem on our hands, Mr. Robinson—a new student, a boy who is without question the most arrogant, insulting, indecent—" He took the switch blade knife from his pocket and proceeded to clean his fingernails with the sharp tip of it.

"Get out of my chair," the principal commanded with quiet authority as he entered.

Tony studied him through narrowed eyes and hesitated for a moment before he languidly got up. "Okay, baldy," he nodded. "Maybe you'd better sit down, at that, before you fall down." He stood at the side of the desk and waited for the principal to make the next move.

"I'll take that," Robinson instructed, indicating the knife as he held out his hand. "Right now." Tony presented it to him with a laconic smirk.

"Sure," he said. "But you maybe better watch out you don't cut yourself, like."

The principal dropped the knife into the desk's bottom drawer, closed it, and spoke pointedly. "Now,"

he said. "What exactly are you trying to accomplish, mister?"

"Huh? I don't dig you."

"Oh, I see," the man nodded, frowning at him. "'Dig me.' So you've come complete with a characterization, have you?"

"Huh? Talk English, man, okay?"

"That's what I say. I've no objection to your hip talk or hep talk, or whatever it's called at the moment. But in my office let's talk plain, old-fashioned English. It'll help us to understand each other."

Tony was conscious of the man's knuckles whitening as he laced his fingers. "Man, what's to understand?" Tony countered. "Come to the point. You're dragging your rear axle in waltz time. Suppose we—"

Mr. Robinson stood and cut in with nearly as much anger as Mrs. Williams had displayed. "That's enough," he advised. "Don't make a profession of being rude. And no more knives, do you understand? If I ever hear that you have one, I'll report you to the juvenile authorities. And let me offer you one more tip, young fellow: Your sassy attitude is not only offensive, but out of date, at least at Santa Bello High School. The entire rock and roll gambit was popular here for a while and then it petered out. So don't think you're bringing anything new to this school. Now get out of here and go back to your classes."

Coldly vehement, Tony scorned, "Thanks for nothing," and stalked out.

The bell had rung for a change of class as he emerged and he saw little Petey Washburn scampering up to him, filled with more admiration now than ever; it was

as if Tony Baker had done the impossible and become a Santa Bello celebrity in hardly more than an hour's time. Most of the kids who passed him in the corridor were certainly reacting to him; some were looking with annoyance and hostility, some were eyeing him with a sort of studied indifference, and some were tittering coyly to attract his attention. But he certainly wasn't going unnoticed.

"Man, everybody is talking about you," disclosed Petey with profound respect.

"That's natural enough," shrugged Tony. "Tell me: what's that Joan chick's last name, the one I dug before we came in here today?"

"Oh, Joan Staples. Not bad, huh? Her old man only owns about half of California; she comes to school everyday in a limousine about four miles long. But she's J.I.'s parking pet, man, and in neon lights."

"J.I., huh? J.I.'s the heap big kingpin around this joint, I gather."

Petey snickered. "Only the biggest. And the toughest. Maybe he looks like the old collar ad, but he's plenty rough. He's got a gang in the Wheelers and Dealers'd cut you in two if he gave the word."

"Oh. Well, then, I'd better run home to Mummy," Tony replied, beginning to walk away. "I get scared real easy."

At the cafeteria's entrance, he noticed J.I. sitting alone with Joan Staples. She appeared more drawn than she had earlier, her mouth jerking nervously, her fingers making restless taps on the table surface. Tony preceded Petey down the cafeteria line, told the kid

to carry both trays over to J.I.'s table, and noticeably dropped a few bills from his roll on the cashier's register. "This'll take care of the tab, baby," he said loudly, "and I'm buying dessert for all the cool cats." Before the astonished cashier could respond, he moved quickly to the table.

"Hi, people," he greeted cordially, sitting across from them as he motioned for Petey to set the trays down and take a seat himself. "I'll be glad to join you, thanks." He blandly ignored the fact that J.I. was making no effort to hide his intense dislike, and concentrated on the girl.

As before, her expression was still critical, but beyond her obvious jitters—as though Breckenridge had just told her something to unnerve her—she scanned Tony in a way to suggest that she was more than willing to see him.

J. I. stared morosely at his soup. "This school is sure getting a low class clientele," he remarked.

"Why, what's your beef, man?" Tony inquired pleasantly. "I just want to play friends. Is that a crime in this state, or are you afraid of the competition?" He waited for only a beat, his avid eyes darting from the crewcutter to Joan Staples, and then back to the crewcutter again. "Talk up, man. I don't sound you at all."

It was Joan Staples who blatantly interrupted the threatened blowup. From the time Tony and Petey had approached their table, he observed, she had been painstakingly trying to pour sugar on a spoon, without luck; her hand trembled agitatedly and the fact appeared to unsettle her more each time she attempted

it. Now the spoon dropped to the table and her hands trembled even more.

She blanched and there was the eery hint for a second that she was doing her best to smother a scream. Unable to control her shaking hands, she placed the sugar container carefully next to J. I. and hid the hands under the table. Her pretty face suddenly became expressionless, although a bead of perspiration appeared on her forehead.

Tony's eyes narrowed as he took it all in, but he made a decisive point of not making too much of it—not yet. His smile returned and he disclosed informally, "See, you made the kitten nervous. A school hot shot like you shouldn't do such an uncavalier thing as that."

The crewcutter didn't answer. He seemed to be concerned about the strange way his girl was behaving, as she slumped heavily on her chair and struggled to force her shoulders still. But otherwise he kept on eating.

"Aah, what do you say we become henchmen, champ?" Tony invited, purposely viewing only Breckenridge. "I'll let you be Vice President." Then, swiftly swinging his attention to the girl, he pretended that absolutely nothing was wrong. "What's the good word, Joan?" he inquired solicitously. "If you dig me like I dig you, we could both float on Cloud Nine. I got dough in my kick'd make Manville look like a pan-handler. Suppose we—"

"Lay dead, Baker," Breckenridge remonstrated, no longer bothering to play it cool. Until now he had shown only distaste; now his glare and the hard beat in his tone announced that war definitely was on its

way. "Joan is my girl. And that I can spell out for you."

Softly, Tony enlightened, "I've got a scoop for you, J.I. Things are changed, starting today. More than you've ever dreamed up in that pointy little head of yours has changed, and all for the better. I'm taking over."

Joan no longer held back her anxiety, a queer kind of evident torment which shuttled from total immobility to a series of unspaced tremors. "What's the matter, Joan?" Tony asked, still displaying no special concern. "You feeling—sick or something?"

"I—I—" she began, unable to articulate. Awkwardly she rose, trembling violently. She hurried away, stiffly and cumbrously, to the door that led to the stairs. The doorway had become jammed with kids who stood in line, waiting to be served, but somehow she managed to push through and disappear.

Biting casually into his sandwich, Tony noticed the fleeting concern on J. I.'s handsome face. "Looks like Joan has a bad case of the logo on the guhgogo, doesn't it, J. I.?" he mentioned. Petey kept eating and listening, loving every moment of it.

J. I. got up, pushed his tray away, and squinted at him. "I told you before, Baker. She's none of your gawddamn business!"

"But you're not tuned in, pal. I'm making her my business."

"You're begging for some bad trouble. . . ."

"Maybe," Tony replied airily, and he made a motion to half rise, himself. He faced Breckenridge squarely

and let his smile freeze. "Why don't you and me make a meet and settle this personally?"

The crewcutter stood erect. "It'll be settled," he maintained. "My way." He pitched his paper napkin into Tony's bowl of soup and stalked away from the table.

With his eyes, Tony ordered Petey to keep eating, to pay no noticeable attention to what had happened. But after a smothered moment, Petey had to speak.

"Man, oh, man," he exclaimed, "but it looks like the fireworks're beginnin' to begin! Did you get a load of the way he was bugged? That J.I.'s no fourflusher when it comes to seein' a rumble through, man. He's got a whole peck o' gunzels on hand any time he wants 'em!"

Tony listened only intermittently. "Tell me, Petey," he said. "What more do you know about Joan Staples? Is she a weedhead?"

"A—what?"

"Never mind. I'll find out soon enough."

3

Outside Santa Bello High, the sky was still a clear, shining blue, and what clouds there were fluffed across it with casual gaiety. In the wide basement the enormous wall clock ticked closer to three and the first series of students were on their way home.

Tony emerged from the gym, took a quick shower, and ambled to his locker. The two boys who shared the locker next to his had given him the ice cube treatment from the start, as though they had heard all

there was to hear about the new kingpin in their school and wanted to be involved with him as little as possible. Now they dressed with slightly more speed and fewer words than they otherwise would have, as soon as they saw him approach them.

"Greetings, gentlemen," Tony acknowledged, anticipating their muffled reply and receiving it. In answer, he gave them both a clipped laugh of contempt, opened his locker, and turned his back.

It's been one rugged day, he thought, and it isn't over yet. Oh, chief, but you really handed me a beaut of an assignment. Let's hope I can come out of all this as a human being. If I get to come out of it at all.

The image of Joan Staples again crossed his mind as he proceeded to dress, and he wondered how long it would take to get to her without arousing any abnormal suspicion. He had seen girls with her kind of trouble before, but never such a stepping-off-the-bandbox type of girl. She had a delicate sort of teen-age beauty, a gently refined quality that didn't connect easily with what might have been wrong with her. She was the sort of elegantly sylvan girl he had kept looking for back home and never quite found. He had almost ached to go after her, once she had left the cafeteria table.

Nearly dressed, he could tell from the corner of his eye that the two boys from the next locker were leaving too hurriedly, as if they had seen something suddenly that made them nudge one another and agree to cut out.

The abrupt silence was engulfing, obstinate. Sensing that he was far from alone, he whirled, and decided that he had no reason to really be overly surprised.

Three tall, somber boys, their jaws uniformly set, were walking toward him, surveying him ominously.

Behind them stood J. I., watching.

As the three came to a slow stop, Tony laughed aloud and faced Breckenridge. "You'll excuse me, champ, but your goons here look so much like perfect casting, they make me just about double up."

"You said you'd like some action," said J. I.

"That's right," nodded Tony, letting the laugh die. "But just between you and me. You're a big strong man. What do you need a convention for?"

J. I. took a tentative step forward and brought his hands from his pockets. For an instant his jaw, like the goons', was set tight and carefully hostile. Then he spoke, as easily as Tony had spoken up in the cafeteria, but he couldn't quite bring off the masquerade of fearlessness as well.

"These are some of The Wheelers and Dealers," he explained, certain to stay standing a respectable distance away from all of them. "If you're going to take over, Baker, then do it now, and I'll watch the fun. This way, I don't get any blood on my pants, see?" Suddenly the drawl dissolved and he glanced at the goons. "Okay, men," he snapped. "Get going."

The three boys began to move in on Tony, but he was ready for them. Quickly he drew a switchblade from inside his shirt and just as quickly flipped the blade open. He lunged it forward into the air, making the goons stop short. One of them, the tallest who had looked the most menacing, instantly went white. None of them moved.

"That's right," Tony cautioned with quiet intensity,

"play it cool. I lost one of these today in the principal's wastebasket. I'd hate like hell to lose another one in somebody's belly."

The most harmless looking of the three made a tentative move but Tony, arching like a cat, leaped at him and snipped a button from his shirt. The kid stared stupified at the open shirt front and jumped back. Tony poised the knife again and warned, "Don't be foolish, chum, or I promise I'll let the air out of you." He took one step back, a lightly self-assured step, to catch Breckenridge as well as the others within his view.

For what felt like an unendurably long moment no one moved, and he knew trouble still was possible. The wall clock ticked more loudly than ever, and there was the odd feeling of time drifting too slowly over great chasms of space. There were heavy, jaunty footsteps clanking over the basement floor from seemingly not too far away, as if they were on their way here. But then he became conscious of their distance, and of hearing them clank off to another corner.

The tallest of the goons, the one who had whitened and then refused to move, finally broke the air. He nodded curtly to Breckenridge, "I've had it, J. I."

When J. I.'s shoulders slumped and he leaned against the wall, Tony relaxed; the reins had been handed over to him.

"Okay," he informed J. I., ignoring the others as he obligingly put away the knife. "We had some fun and games, boys, and school's over. Everybody go home. You can tell *all* The Wheelers and Dealers they've got a new prez." He nodded for the goons to beat it, and fast, and they obeyed.

Breckenridge remained.

"You're a big boy with that onion peeler, Baker," Breckenridge remarked with a scorn he was nearly able to mask.

"Big enough to take over," Tony smiled.

Breckenridge's own unexpected smile met his, and he extended his hand. "Fair enough," he nodded. "Then we might as well call a peace conference and be gentlemen about the whole thing, no?"

"Sure, why not?" Tony grinned, ready for the lunge. It came even sooner than he expected. Breckenridge sprang at him, cursing and aiming a fist below Tony's stomach. Instantly the knife came out again and the blade flicked open. With his free hand, Tony grabbed J. I.'s plaid necktie; with the blade he shaved the bottom half of the tie to the floor. He poised it once more and called, "You ready for more, J. I.? Do you really want to mix it up?"

Again the clock offered its persistent, implicative ticking as the crewcutter retreated, his handsome face contorted in the agony of defeat. It was time to rub it in, and Tony did.

"I'll make you a deal, champ," said Tony. "You can be vice prez and treasurer in charge of weedheads. You wouldn't mind that, would you, champ?" He chuckled. "After all, your goons'd stick by you, wouldn't they? If I gave them the word, that is. How do you like your new office, champ?"

Biting his lip, Breckenridge threw back his shoulders and exhaled. "Let me lay a word of advice on you, shiv," he warned after a moment. "I don't die easy, no matter how brave you are right now with your onion

peeler. Joan is my chick. And if you don't keep away from her, and I mean away, even the chopper isn't going to help you. Just keep that in mind."

Disposing of what was left of his tie, he walked away. He carried with him the attitude of having won a victory, at that.

4

So far, Tony Baker decided as he took the flight of stairs to the school's first floor, his luck was entirely with him. At the rate he was going, though, he thought it would have to start cracking pretty soon.

He heard, "Baker!" as he headed for the main double doors. He turned to see one of the Wheatie-eaters, an athletically built Tarzan complete with the basso profundo voice and the school letters on his sweater.

"Hi," said the Tarzan as he offered his pile driver of a hand. "I'm Steve Bentley."

"That's too bad," Tony remarked, limply accepting it, giving no sign that he cared to. He surveyed the athlete and silently gave him credit for remaining friendly and not giving up.

"I'm prez of The Rangers," Bentley said. "We have most of the football players."

"Yeah?" Tony sneered. "Well, I'm out for real action, dad, but that's not the kind of action I'm looking for."

The Tarzan still didn't offer to slam him against the nearest wall. He waved his hand faintly as he left and called, "Well, see you around."

"Sure," Tony answered. "Sure, why not?"

The parking lot was about half emptied by the time he got outside. A klatsch of kids was batting the breeze about five or six cars away from his own car, and he could judge by the way each of them gradually looked up that they knew who he was; that maybe they even had been waiting for him to make his outdoor appearance.

Getting closer, he counted two boys and seven girls. At least three of the chicks did the giggling bit and he knew he couldn't afford to pass up the chance.

He sauntered more slowly until he reached them and then greeted, "Hi, doll," to the first girl he sighted. She was a rampantly fat redhead who sat on the left front fender and showed him by the way she returned his glance that she was more than interested. "I'm Tony Baker, doll," he said. "Who're you?"

The answer came fast. "My name's Mary Jane Andrews." A few of the others followed up with more giggles as the two boys made it apparent that they weren't overjoyed.

"Mary Jane?" Tony repeated, taking it big, pressing hard on the name. "Hey, you pulverize me, doll! That's a crazy name; makes me frantic. I always go mouth frothing when I hear the name Mary Jane, you dig?" He leaned, until his hand came skillfully close to touching her thigh. "We've got to get together some time and have a ball, Mary Jane, you know that? What do you say?"

The fat girl was flustered and gazed about her with reddening embarrassment, but she was up to him. "Well, I *have* been going steady," she responded in an

unpleasant voice that reminded him of the crankings of rusty motors, "but I guess there's no reason why I—"

"Great!" he interrupted and waved his hand not at her but at all the other girls he managed to scan. "I like competition. I invite it! And I sure as hell get a big fat bang out of saying your name—" He paused for only a flick as he glanced around again "—Mary Jane. . . ."

If there were any signals to be sent up, he decided, he'd sent them by now, although no one appeared to be immediately reacting. He stayed on for another minute and then rubbed Mary Jane's knee as he told them all that an important appointment was waiting.

He sauntered in the direction of his Chrysler, but purposely walked by it because there was no doubt that they all were watching. He rounded the side of the school and wondered just how long it would take for Alice Williams to come out.

In the course of one school day he had caused plenty of commotion. Some of it, of course, had been aimed at Mrs. Williams, and he was sorriest about her.

In some way, somewhere in the future, he knew he would have to make it up to her. And not only with verbal apologies.

5

The *humiliation*, thought J. I. Breckenridge as he left the locker rooms outside the gym.

The lousy rotten gawddamn humiliation . . .

It wasn't so much a matter of this creepy crumbbum who called himself Tony Baker and who dropped so

suddenly from outer space. The humiliation of having let himself be kicked in the gut had stung because MacDonald, Sigurdson and Everett, his three best men, would find out about it. They had cut out before the big mouthed bastard had sheared his five dollar neck-tie; but they would find out. Somehow nothing was ever kept a secret in this crummy school, even when there were no witnesses to make with the tattle tale bit.

They would learn about it and they would righteously demand that he change his name to J. I. Mud. And what the hell does any top man do without his three best men?

His name was Jerome Irwin Breckenridge; he and his family lived only a quarter mile (and a quarter million dollars, some of the wiseacres still liked to add) away from the Staples estate, and in another seven months he would be eighteen years old. At the still genteel country club to which his mother and two older sisters belonged, he was known as the last remaining teen ager who still remembered to say 'Sir' and 'Ma'am' and to open doors for his elders. He also appeared at the important functions there, always promptly, and courteously danced with his mother's lady friends. "Class invariably shows," they said about him. "Look how devoted he is to his mother and how considerate he is of the older members. He's certainly come through beautifully without a father."

They didn't know, nor would they have believed if anyone had told them, that at school he led his own gang of kids who probably had never even heard of the country club, and that he ruled them with an iron hand. The old buzzards knew nothing about him,

not even his old lady, and that was perfect with him; that was precisely the way he wanted it.

Even his teachers thought of him as a sort of Big Lord Fauntleroy—always doing what he was asked, always charmingly obedient and gracious with the ladies—and he was satisfied with that interpretation, too. There was Mrs. Williams in the English class, for instance, the oh-so-proper post-chick with the terrific build, who kind of semi-consciously was always showing off the fact that she had dimensions as solid as the seventeen-year-olds and was really as curvo. Someone had said that Mrs. Williams was actually a widow gal and that her old man had been knocked off in the sucker Korea deal. J. I. didn't know. She still wore that wedding band on her pretty finger and she acted cube enough to be married, but he just didn't know. He enjoyed the way she honestly thought of him as the original Sunday School psalm singer, and he fed into it; he was always courteous to her, always played the whole thing close to the tattersall by polishing all her apples.

It was a matter of brains, and J. I. Breckenridge had plenty. It was even kicks to watch the way she, and two or three of the other profs, treated him in a special way that said they'd be the first stiff available to play character witness for poor, misunderstood J. I.

J. I. had looked older than eighteen for a long time, he knew; most of the saloons in town gave him the drop dead eye when he took a date in for a drink, but up around the Angelino section all they would do would be to ask him how old he was and he would say, "Over twenty-one." In no time at all he would be

served his booze, and his date of the evening would know he was the biggest shot around. Even when there was a problem or two now and then with some of those mamma's boys of bartenders here in town, a little bit of green cabbage sprinkled delicately from his expensively tailored pocket would do the trick; if he really wanted to press down hard on the body English, he would be served. And he called 'Mister' in the bargain. There wasn't any way in the world that you could beat class.

The Breckenridge family, he had come to repeat proudly after a while, having heard it from the time he could remember, had just about founded this hick town. They had been here even longer than the Stapleses, and that, everyone agreed, was really going some, because the Stapleses were old and choice property who could buy and sell the Mellons. Maybe the Breckenridges didn't have all the loot the cornball town gossips said they did (Great Grandpa Breckenridge had left the thirty-six room house on Mechling Way to the current generation and everyone in Santa Bello knew it was the showplace to end all showplaces), but there was enough loot to go around.

His father, James Irwin Breckenridge II, had died eight years ago, and in the damndest way. Pop, who flew no fewer than 60,000 miles a year for the firm, and who somehow never had time to get to know his boy, had taken a flight to Pensacola on business one night even though he had one rip roaring cold and Mama pleaded with him to rest for a day or two first.

But Pop never listened to anyone, particularly when big business was involved. He took the flight and found

himself stranded in the air for four or five hours longer than necessary because the goofy winter weather wouldn't let him land, and when he finally stepped off the plane he was doubled up with coughs and sneezes. Twenty minutes later he was dead in Pensacola and the screwy Florida doctors never did agree on whether or not it was pneumonia.

When the barbarism of the funeral was over, Mama was able to console herself. "I have my son," she wept grandly, clutching J. I. to her mountainous breasts. "He loves his mother and he will always take care of her."

Only last week, on one of those normally rainy nights that called for considerably less than super dramatics, Joan Staples had reached for him in just about the same way. She had the kind of chassis that gallant men died for, but, despite her terrific good looks and her knockout shape, she was starting to become a hell of a drag.

She had loused up those treacherously beautiful blue eyes by crying. From strictly left field she had implored, "J. I., do you love me? Will you take care of me?"

It was enough to send shivers up you.

J. I. couldn't remember the first time he'd known there was a Joan Staples. (*"You and Joan really should get to know each other well; after all, the Stapleses and Breckenridges are the oldest really American families in Santa Bello and ought to stick together, don't you think?"*), but he'd genuinely come to know her during that odd ball Milton course in Mrs. Williams'

Junior English class. Joan had been honest kicks for a long while, the wildest and wooliest when it came to making him happy. But too soon she'd started to become the biggest drag in life.

Only today, before nine o'clock and before that creepo named Tony Baker had busted in like a kind of long-sideburned Bela Lugosi, Joan had stooped to begging. In the caveman and sporty days, she had been too big for that. Too haughty, too First Family of Santa Bello. But today she was on his everloving neck, doing it big, pleading with him to take over in spades.

"I'm dry," she'd pleaded, in that nutty, sexy, bottled-in-cream voice. "J. I., I'll get you the bread as soon as I can. I swear."

"You got no bread?" he'd exclaimed, feigning masculine alarm. "You, the real rich-bitch Staples heiress? Gonna grab three million hunks of bread when Daddy kicks off? *You* got no bread, honey-o?"

"Please, J. I. Don't. . ."

The 'please' had been most pleasing, and he'd kept playing it up, for as long as it would play. Why in hell shouldn't they say 'please' to Jerome Irwin Breckenridge who, after all, had been told again and again and again by his mother that he would turn out to be the biggest man in the state of California since the days of the whole cornball Gold Rush?

Please. . . It was music.

Suddenly the fun descended as he slid into his Cadillac and started the motor. In the long run you just didn't kid around with creepos like Joan Staples who all of a heap switched into becoming possible liabilities. She had been kicks in the fancy saloons around Santa

Bello, and she had been more than wonderfully weird in the hay when he'd snapped his Breckenridge fingers.

But she was sniffing her nose like Miss Mary Jane these days, and how could you trust her? In the cafeteria—in front of Baker, yet—she'd pulled a no-holds-barred scene, nose-sniffing like she was ready for the straits and zazzing up an honest-to-Bette-Davis tremor, and before long the most naive person would legitimately be prepared to point the holy finger at her.

No. The game was over. He would have to do something about Joan Staples. And soon. You couldn't allow a nutsy weedhead like that spoil all the Breckenridge fun for even a minute. That didn't even belong.

And while he was at it, there was this new fry. Tony Baker. The neo-Elvis Presleyite with the 16th Century sideburns and the father-dear jive talk. Baker was here, of course, for the sole purpose of cramping styles. Already he'd yanked his big-boy shiv around enough to frighten big guys like MacDonald, Everett and Sigurdson, and there was no telling what he had up his square sleeve from here on in. Maybe grabbing Joan, maybe not. But what gave now was to watch, and to watch carefully.

Baker, sure as hell, wasn't going to disrupt James Irwin Breckenridge's big game. Not after all this big planning.

THE WHOLE THING was ridiculous, Alice Williams knew, but just the sight of the marijuana cigarette in front of her made her feel queasy, almost ill.

It rested with its own comic opera kind of innocence, beside an ordinary cigarette, on the gleamingly long table in Principal Robinson's office. Handling the marijuana, as she had done a moment before, there had been no mistaking its texture or contents. It was cloaked in a double thickness of wheat straw paper, it was apparently hand rolled, and it was a little shorter than its more legitimate brother. As the Police Commissioner, who stood at the head of the table, discussed it in blunt and seemingly unnecessary detail, two of the other teachers—Paul Harkness in math and Jeanne Knakel from the girls' gym class—touched it with no obvious revulsion. But, Alice decided, maybe they were made of considerably sterner stuff; it struck her as being a frightening, even deadly thing no less lethal than a pistol or the crooked arm of a mugger. And every bit as foreign, fortunately.

"In the language the addicts use amongst themselves," Commissioner Burroughs was saying to this small segment of the Santa Bello faculty, "marijuana is

referred to as 'Mary Jane,' 'pot,' 'weed,' or 'tea.' Hardly the kind of tea you ladies and gentlemen are drinking this minute." The weak gag lightened the burden for a moment and most of the listeners obliged him with a tentative smile. "They never say to each other, 'Let's smoke a marijuana cigarette.' They say, 'Let's turn on,' or 'Let's blast a joint.' "

Alice felt it was time to break in, to let him know she was as interested as any other citizen would be, but at the same time to infer that this entire business had no immediate bearing on anyone here.

"Commissioner," she said, sitting forward, "please excuse this interruption—but aren't you magnifying the issue?"

As if he hadn't come fully prepared to cross swords and resented her question, Willard Burroughs frowned a rather overly righteous frown. He was young, just this side of being considered handsome, and he was known as the boy wonder of Santa Bello; in the past three years he had risen in local politics with dazzling speed and already there was talk of placing his name in nomination as the next mayor. But his popularity, Alice was convinced, didn't automatically make him a social scientist.

"Mrs. Williams," he declared evenly, "a marijuana cigarette was found on the floor of one of the classrooms, and another was found in the girls' gym."

She met his frown. "And that's enough to start a big crusade here in Santa Bello High?"

From the opposite end of the long table, Mr. Robinson attempted to referee with what she had come to recognize as characteristic kindness. "We all know

your reputation, Mrs. Williams," he conceded, "—that you don't believe in such a thing as a bad boy or a bad girl, but—"

Burroughs cut in, more disturbed now than angry. "There's a high school in Indiana that had no problem, three years ago," he rumbled. "Out of a total enrollment of twelve hundred students, two hundred and eighty-five were found to be taking marijuana or heroin. These aren't round figures. They are accurate facts. And this condition was uncovered *only* through a horrible accident."

He was addressing a segment of the faculty who sat around the table, but his eyes riveted into Alice Williams. "One of the students, desperate for money to pay for his habit, sold bennies—for quarters and dimes—to kids in elementary school." He paused, waiting for it to sink in, and then asked, "Are you still with me, Mrs. Williams?"

Flustered, she nodded.

"It was the death of an eight year old, who had been addicted to marijuana and then to heroin, that exposed the ugly facts."

Alice was conscious of the principal's secretary, Miss Dodge, pursing her bloodless lips in a way that told him she found the whole story perfectly incredible. But no one else moved. Burroughs continued, "By that time, though, it was too late for more than one hundred teenagers who were already addicted. . . ."

The point hadn't been proved to everyone. But everyone had stopped drinking tea.

Alice left the principal's office as soon as the meeting

adjourned, cautious to remain civil to Willard Burroughs, who gave her an understanding, nearly patronizing grin, but still satisfied that he had overstated his case in a sort of grandstand political play. It had been as though he were talking to a group of emotional idiots who might in time be fired up enough to vote for him.

A possible narcotics wave in Santa Bello High School? "It can happen here," he had ended pontifically. "I'm asking for your help to prevent it." He meant well, she was certain, but there was no getting over the fact that he spoke in rather lurid headlines, in blanket statements that sounded like rehearsals for the next Fourth of July speech at St. Clair Park.

Alice Williams walked toward her car. She was beginning her third year in the Santa Bello English department, and she was as happy in her job as an unexpected widow could expect to be. An attractive and sharply intelligent girl, she had always prided herself on never giving in to the excesses of impulse until the early fall of 1951, when one of those corny hayrides had seated her next to Buck Williams.

At nineteen, and vigorously positive that she knew the solutions to every one of the world's ills, she had fallen quite hopelessly and daisy-pickingly in love with Buck, who had even more solutions available than she. Buck was a senior majoring in the Romance Languages at Dutton College in '51 when she'd been a sophomore, and she had recognized him as a combination of Abraham Lincoln, Justice Hughes, and Tyrone Power even before the hayride. He was the popularity kid, the big man on campus. In the college newspaper, which he

edited, he always came out foursquare for the verities and human rights, and after a while it never occurred to Alice Kensington that in time he wouldn't become desperately conscious of her.

After far too many discussions of Toqueville and Sartre, Buck kissed her with a sweepingly unstymied passion, and on the first date following the hayride made love to her on the swing on her back porch. Two weeks later they eloped.

She knew precisely what she was getting into. Buck wanted to graduate, but he was restless about Korea, intermittently ruffled because college allowed him to stay a civilian while others were banging it out in uniform. "Look," he announced one night. "It just won't work. I don't belong here, making all these superficial cracks about the lot of mankind while American mankind is getting its head bashed in. I love you, baby, but I just don't belong here in bed with you. Not now, not yet."

Buck enlisted quietly, without the fancy fanfare he would have deemed right for a Toqueville or Sartre. The end had been right out of Gilbert and Sullivan. He was killed on the very last day of the war, only minutes before the truce was called.

The feeling that her own life was ended ("We may not be the Curies, or the Lambs, or even Frankie and Johnnie once I get back home, darling," his last letter had read, "but we will make the damnedest effort together to touch the stars with our own twenty fingers") persisted for months. It took Don Corbett, Buck's best friend, to help to straighten her out.

"Buck hated waste," Don confided, "and he would

have been the first guy to say that you were wasting time. Mourn, sure, but do it constructively. Buck did his best to put the teaching bug in you. If you have it at all, then use it. The schools are crying not for teachers, but for *good* teachers, teachers who care about kids who want to stretch their minds as wide and far as Buck always worked to stretch his. For God's sake, don't die, Alice. There's been too much of that going on."

She completed her teacher's training and was assigned to Santa Bello. The work she had accomplished in the past three years served finally not only as a homage to Buck, as it had been intended, but as a duty to herself.

Approaching her car now, seeing the last of the students drive or walk away towards home, she was grateful again to Don. Her students, for the most part, were with her all the way and wanted to learn. Buck would have been terribly pleased; there was no difference any longer between duty and homage.

After three solid efforts, the motor of her ancient Plymouth still refused to turn over. It was exasperating, but there was no one to blame but herself, she recalled; for the past week she'd been intending to ask Gus at the garage to give the car a thorough going over, and she'd kept putting it off.

Another car pulled up beside hers, and she heard, "Hey, teach'—you want a push there?" The car and the voice belonged to Tony Baker.

For a moment she thought he might get out and come to her, but he didn't; he merely leaned forward and

grinned at her through his opened window. Alice, not quite sure how she should deal with this young Mr. Baker who had seemed so intent, so maliciously intent, on breaking up her class this morning, decided to answer him, with care and, she hoped, with understanding. She was almost embarrassedly conscious of the way Mr. Robinson and some of the other members of the faculty regarded her. To them she was Mrs. Williams the do-gooder, the professional soul-saver, the instructress who preached that the worst of boys could be helped. In a little under three years she had become something close to a caricature, and the caricature rankled. If she in any way agreed to be friendly with perhaps the worst potential troublemaker she'd ever had in class, the word would get around, of course, and she would be Soul Saving Alice all over again.

But suddenly it didn't matter.

"I—think my battery's dead," she said.

He reached over enough to open his right door and offered, "Hop in." For an oddly long period of time there was the subtle aura of gentility about him, as if crudeness and bebopping aggressiveness were foreign to him. "Come on, leave it there," he insisted, smiling. "I'll give you a drive home in a real kemp." There was no way for her to be sure what his game actually was.

"Well. . .," she half-answered, timorously reluctant, "I don't think I should impose. It's awfully kind of you, but—" And almost giddily she let it hang in the brisk afternoon air.

"What's the matter?" he baited. "You scared?"

There was no abrupt way to rid herself of the hesitancy. "I'll call the Triple A . . .," she began again.

"Who're you afraid of, Mrs. Williams—me, or yourself?" The pause was quick. "You don't have to worry; I'll see that you behave yourself. After all, a teacher's got to behave like a teacher, right?"

He was working to get a rise out of her again, she knew, again working to put her on the defensive, enough to make her appear ludicrous. But the timing was beginning to get out of hand and she realized that she had been hesitating only because of the faculty who would be tittering up a do-gooder storm. She slid out of her Plymouth and, walking around to get into his car, discovered that her smile wasn't as forced as she might have thought it would be.

"Okay," she said. "I'll call the Triple A from home."

2

His driving was fast, but not reckless. The cigarillo rolled easily around in his mouth and he appeared to be perfectly conscious of her mild discomfort in the seat next to his. Almost against her will, she discovered herself observing him quizzically, trying to decipher what his overall plan was, if indeed he had one. She had seen tough boys, really ape-cousins, who were drenched in an overwhelming hatred for authority. Tony Baker wasn't one of these, she was sure. There were the makings of violence within him, perhaps, and the thought occurred to her fleetingly that she was in the automobile of a stranger who very well might have committed a crime.

But the fear dissolved as they kept driving; he talked tough and wanted to be known as a bad, bad

boy, yes. But his eyes were gentle when he was relaxed and his hands somehow were not the hands of a delinquent. She tried to relax, too, convincing herself that Tony Baker was salvageable.

"Will you tell me about yourself, Tony?" she asked after they had ridden for several minutes.

His eyes narrowed and she could see his hands grip a little more tightly around the wheel. "What's to tell?"

"Just anything, so I can get to know you better. How long you've been in California, what your plans are for the future. . . ."

He nodded urbanely. "Maybe now we're cookin'. You want to know me better, and I wouldn't pass up knowing you a little better. How's for stopping for a beer?"

Alice fumbled for a prop and found a cigarette in her purse. "Aren't you under age?"

"More or less, maybe," he conceded amiably. "But I can always pass for a teenage adult."

"Tony," she ventured, purposely looking at him as he helped himself to furtive glances at her covered knees, "what's your angle?"

Tautening slightly, he asked, "There's a nice brain-picking question. Is there a law that says I've got to have an angle?" As though he, too, needed a prop, he reached over and switched on the radio.

"It seems you're trying to prove something."

Tony Baker chuckled without appreciable effort, but it didn't come off quite naturally. "Look, teach'," he notified, turning the dial until he located one of those rock and roll numbers with the too persistent beat.

"It's all in your mind, whatever you talking about. Not mine."

"Is it really?" Alice countered. "I wasn't the one who tried to disrupt the class this morning. I didn't go into the principal's office with a cigar and a knife." She let it hang, purposely waiting for him to confirm her suspicion.

Innocently, he volunteered, "You know something, teach'? You wouldn't look good with a cigar. You're not the type."

It was meant to throw her off balance, but Alice pretended to be completely unmoved. "What type are *you*, Tony?"

"Me? I'm satisfied."

"But are you?" she remonstrated. "You work so terribly hard to have everyone take notice of you, to make people actually dislike you. Does that honestly satisfy you, Tony?"

He shrugged. "Have it your way. Tell the truth, I don't give a cotton pickin' damn who cares what about me. But you don't dig that, do you?" Again he chuckled and pitched the cigarillo through his window. "I'll tell you what, teach'. Let me be president of the Williams Personal Service Club, okay? If your husband doesn't mind."

"I'm a widow."

"Oh." He paused but didn't change his expression or his tone. "Well, we can start off picking my brain by having a cozy beer together."

"I'm sorry I brought it up," she said coldly, unable to reach him. "There's my apartment house up ahead. Number 3459."

He pulled up in front of the building without comment, but he made no move to slide out from behind the wheel to open her door. As she closed the door after her and began to thank him, Tony drawled, "I'll pick you up in the morning."

"My—car will be ready by then."

"What's the difference? We have things to talk over, you and I."

"Do we?" she asked, a little embarrassedly aware that her landlady was sitting on the front porch, paying full attention. "Such as what?"

"Oh, I'll figure something out," he replied with none of the wise guy trappings. He regarded her simply, almost tenderly.

"When you do," said Alice, "I'll be very glad to meet you. In the classroom." Backing away just a step she called, "Thanks for the ride."

Without answering, he gunned the motor and drove off.

The landlady, Mrs. Deming, had been jealously protective of her, openly so, since she'd moved in three years ago, and seldom looked kindly on escorts whom she herself hadn't introduced. Although that taxing phase of their relationship was pretty well over—Mrs. Deming used to "innocently invite" seemingly eligible young men from her church over for Sunday dinners for the bald purpose of getting Alice married—it still was something approaching a personal affront when Alice arrived home with someone not distinctly of the landlady's choosing.

"That young fellow a pupil or a teacher, Alice?" Mrs.

Deming inquired now, facing her squarely and waiting for a nothing-but-the-truth answer, as if it were owed her. "I couldn't tell; he looks young but a little too old to be still studying. . . ."

"He's a new pupil, Mrs. Deming," Alice said, suddenly tired, "and he was kind enough to drop me off. My car stalled at the school."

"Ummm," Mrs. Deming nodded and helped herself to the inevitable chocolates on her heavy lap. "Well, if you ask me, it isn't too smart, riding around these days in a teenager's car. If it'd been me, I'd've walked home first. It always pays to be over-cautious in this day and age, what with all you read in the papers about these juvenile delinquents and all." She sat forward in her rocking chair just before Alice pulled the screen door open. "Ah, Alice—maybe it's none of my business, but Harvey Potter called on the telephone a little while ago, and him and I had a very long talk about you."

Alice attempted to hold in the sigh. Harvey Potter had been after Alice to marry him for close to a year now, and Mrs. Deming refused to understand how she possibly could think of passing up such a wonderful catch. He and his two brothers owned their own dry goods store down the block and it was the clearest thing in the world to Mrs. Deming that any other woman would be only too happy to be his wife. Alice had found it next to impossible to explain that she had other ideas.

"Poor Harvey's so upset that you don't want to keep company with him much any more, dear," sweetly scolded Mrs. Deming. "I told him it was none of my business, but that he ought to, well, assert himself a

little more, maybe. You know what I mean. I told him that sometimes even a nice girl like Alice Williams with such a fine head on her shoulders can be in the dark now and then about what's best for her. That's what I said."

"Do you mind, Mrs. Deming?" Alice broke in. "I'm awfully tired right now. I want to get upstairs and call about my car and then take a nap. Maybe we can talk about it later."

"Well, not that it's any of my business. . . ."

In her room Alice closed the blinds and changed to shorts and halter. She wondered why the odd feelings of restlessness always began to set in at about this time every day.

Was there really a riddle to this Tony Baker, or was he exactly what he wanted her to believe he was—an uncouth and thoughtless boy? Was she giving him too much credit, as she feared she sometimes did with the other youngsters?

The answers wouldn't jump into place, she decided as she sat at the edge of her single bed and tiredly riffled through her address book for the number of the automobile club. There was something about him, something about the too obvious way in which he struggled to be known as a rubber-stamped bum, that said most of it was a pose. Maybe all of it.

But why?

Curiously, she suspected that she would find out, in one way or another. And perhaps very soon.

Joan Staples' breath was a sharp pain in her lungs as she crouched, alone, in the principal's wide office

and listened for unwelcome sounds. J.I. had guaranteed that there would be plenty of time to do what he wanted her to do, and still stroll out into the corridor as if nothing had happened; there was to be a big faculty meeting in the teachers' conference room on the second floor, he'd told her, and even the secretary would be there.

As usual, he had been right, and she'd been able to find the Tony Baker folder in Mr. Robinson's filing cabinet without much trouble at all. Now she stood frozen, listening intently. Finding her breath again, she clutched her books to her and moved swiftly out into the hall.

She was perfectly safe. J.I. had begun to kid her about the way she was doing the scared rabbit bit these days, and maybe he was right. Maybe you could get anything you wanted done only if you refused to knuckle under every time you saw your shadow. He'd been trying to knock that sense into her skull for as long as she could remember, and she hoped he'd be proud of what she'd just done.

Peggy Arlington, the cornball whom she'd been screwy enough to consider her very best friend just a few years ago, saw her walking (*too fast*, she reminded herself, *too fast; I have to learn to walk the way I used to—casually and always sure of myself*) and called, "Hi, Joan! Wait up!"

Oh, brother, she moaned. This is all I need. The paper doll cutter, the weirdy Girl Scout probably wants me to bake some cookies with her. She tried to work some expression into her face as she waited, and finally managed to fix a patient smile. After all, there was no

reason to get bitchy with Peggy. The creep would smell something and might even go and tell her parents that something was wrong.

"Say, we haven't seen you around in a awfully long time," Peggy scolded with her toothy grin as she caught up with Joan. "Where've you been hiding? You haven't been to any of the meetings or *anything*!"

"Gee, I—" Joan faltered, aware that the smile was frozen by now. "I've been real hung up, Peggy. You know. I've been meaning to look you up."

"Well, gosh, it just isn't like you," Peggy declared, still not persuaded. "Even Agnes was mentioning it yesterday, how you seem sort of—well, different, and Agnes never notices anything."

"Uh—how about if we do this," Joan asserted, anxious to get away as fast as possible because J.I. would be waiting for her on Bankman Road. "Come over to the house on Saturday, you and Agnes and all the rest of the gang. We'll swim and have a cook-out or something, okay? I'll even get some fellows over and we'll have a ball."

"Sure," Peggy nodded, pacified. "Sure, that sounds swell." As Joan struggled again to break away, though, Peggy eyed her sternly and asked, "Joan, is everything all right?"

"What do you mean?" Joan defended, afraid to face her any more. "Certainly everything's all right. What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. But you just don't—look the way you used to. I mean, that's your affair and all, but after all, I *am* your best friend, or at least I used to be, and I wouldn't want for anything to be wrong. . . ."

Joan gave a short, clipped laugh. "You're nuts, Peg. Everything's copasetic. Uh, I'll see you and everybody on Saturday—about one or so, okay? Now I have to fly."

She hurried to her car and was away from the school within minutes. Nervously she fumbled for a cigarette in the glove compartment. So the boom was starting to lower, she thought. Even the kids are beginning to tell that I've changed.

J.I. still hadn't arrived by the time she reached their private meeting place on Bankman Road, the spot they had discovered together early this spring. The fall's heat had made the long green boughs of the trees heavy and low, and she and J.I. could veil their cars deeply in shadow so that other cars could drive almost perilously close by without even seeing them.

Waiting, waiting with an awful impatience she would never have recognized in herself as little as six months ago, she found that she had lighted her second cigarette before throwing away her first. Where *was* he? What was taking him so terribly long? There used to be the time he would precede her, when he wouldn't have dreamed of keeping her waiting. That had been when he really had cared about her—about *her*, Joan Staples, and not about what she could do for him.

He would be demanding money today. He would be cruel and might even hit her when she told him she was flat. It hadn't been like this in the spring. No, he wouldn't hit her; why would he have to? He'd laugh, maybe, and tell her it was her own tough luck if she was broke. Sticks didn't grow on trees, not so that you

could reach for them yet, anyway. Maybe he'd tell her again to steal. Not that he'd ever *told* her, in so many words; he was cleverer than that; you'd never catch a cool cat like J.I. giving those kinds of sucker orders.

But he had been the one to make the first suggestion about trying the Morino gimmick, a few months ago. It had worked and for a while she'd had enough money to give him. With his introduction to the man who managed the luxuriously fancy dress shop on Patterson Place, she had grudgingly agreed to play the kickback game.

She would choose two dresses at a time, each retailing for seventy-five dollars, and the bills would be sent to her father. Instead of taking the dresses, Joan would take fifty dollars cash from Mr. Morino and everyone would be happy.

Everyone but Joan, who knew there was no way of rephrasing the fact that all of it was crooked.

She had stopped it finally, not, unfortunately, because it was crooked (*when did I stop really tasting the difference between what's absolutely right and absolutely wrong?* she wondered again), but because the chiseler named Morino had decided he had too much to lose, and had announced—on one of those afternoons when she was in desperate need of a stick—that from that day on they would proceed as normal. The one difference would be, though, that from that day on she would make fifteen dollars on the deal instead of fifty.

"Business, you know, honey," Mr. Morino informed her pleasantly. "I'm a little too old and tired to be taking too many chances. If this setup ever backfires I'd be the one who would get hurt, not you."

Now there were no more outs; not yet. She couldn't keep going to Daddy for too much more money than he remembered giving her each week. Not that he ever would miss it, of course, and not that he ever had been stingy with her; if anything, he was the most generous man in the world.

But there had been those drearily close calls a few times, when his bignose secretary had looked too closely at the personal checkbook and had reported that Joan seemed to be getting an awfully lot of allowance these days. Daddy, as guilelessly and as only momentarily interested in her as ever, had even mentioned it. "Not that I'd refuse you anything, darling," he'd advised on the run, "but where does the money go? I mean, you needn't tell your loving old man a single thing if you don't want to. Remember, we made that pact a long time ago; we respect one another's secrets because we're pals around here rather than parents. But don't you think you're hitting the old man for a little *too* much once in a while?"

He had even remembered to chuck her under the chin, in the absent way he had done when she'd been four years old.

No, she couldn't afford to play around with him anymore, not too much. Even Mother, who could remember the most intimate details of her various clubs but always forgot her own daughter's birthday, would start noticing things, too, pretty soon if she didn't watch out. And that she would be totally unable to bear.

Yet something would have to be worked out. Her stomach felt tight, her hands were getting increasingly moist, and she needed a stick today like she'd never

needed one before. J.I. had to be able to come up with the answer. He always had, in the past. He couldn't be *that* cruel. . . .

After too long a period of waiting, his car drove up and parked directly behind hers. Joan hurried out and slid in beside him as she prayed to calm down, or to at least appear in control of herself; J.I. rarely looked directly at her any more, but he never missed a trick.

Now he sat back and there was a relaxed, superior smile on his tanned face.

"You look like you've got the chuck horrors," he commented, dropping his hand over the seat rest and successfully defeating her with no strain on his part at all.

Joan held herself back from grabbing his sleeve. "J.I.," she maintained, fighting off the tears, "I've got to light up!"

She feared then, even before he shrugged and glanced away in his feigned boredom, that this meeting on which she had depended so would be useless; that perhaps she never had been able to count on him, not even at the beginning when he had seemed so attentive, when he had pretended how much he wanted her.

"What's with the principal's office?" he inquired.

"Please, J.I. . . ."

"I said let's deal with first things first, and don't hammer me, kid. What's with the principal's office?"

She lit a cigarette; it no longer mattered that her hand shook. "The records only show that he's a transfer from North High in Chicago. He's an orphan living with his aunt on Seaton Street. That's all. A bad stu-

dent, hard for teachers to tame, got very bad grades. There wasn't anything else." Finally she clutched at his arm. "J.I., you've got to get Jukey to give me a stick!"

Dully he released his arm and helped himself to a cigarette in the pocket of her blouse. "For money, you can get anything, kid."

"I'm clean," she said helplessly. "I've used my whole bank account, and I've borrowed from everybody I know. I just can't ask my Dad for any more advances. I told you that this morning!"

"Yeah," he nodded. "But I'm not in business to listen to sad songs. It's your problem where you get the gold. If you wanted to chicken out of the Morino deal, and that was about as cushy as anything in life, that's your beef, not mine."

"I—" she began and then stopped. Fighting the tears because J.I. had always told her he couldn't take them, she gradually sat up and murmured, "I'll figure it out. Some way."

"That's right, kid, you do that," J.I. said. "I'll pick you up about nine on Friday and we'll make a meet with Jukey at The Drag. If you're burning cash by then, he'll have plenty of property to share with you."

"Friday? I can't wait till Friday!" she cried and was too nervously conscious of how he was watching the way she was almost at the point of losing her senses. When his palm rubbed idly over her bare arm, she knew then what was coming next. "Do you hear, J.I.? It's got to be today!"

The hand gripped her arm and he brought her to him. "Take it easy, kid," he said softly. "You know old

Uncle J.I. wouldn't tease you, don't you?" He touched her as intimately as he did because she had let him know months ago that it was all right. That anything he wanted with her was all right. "Now we aren't going to waste time, are we?"

"You—mean you have some with you?"

"Maybe," he drawled. "Now let's show nice old Uncle J.I. how grateful you can be."

To ease her sudden giddiness, Joan looked at the tanned knuckles of his hand, which otherwise might have been carved from brown wood. "J.I.," she breathed, "don't be—rough with me. . . Be nice. . ." She closed her eyes, aware that there was no force, no real protest in her.

"Sure," he chuckled. "Why not?"

"Will you—" she began, "before you, before anything happens, will you kiss me first?"

"Sure," he repeated. "Sure, why not?"

"And then you'll let me light up?"

"I said we'll see, didn't I?" he said, grabbing her hair roughly. "Just take it easy, baby. I like for my weed-heads to take it real easy."

THE SMOKY NIGHT CLUB just a mile and a half from Santa Bello High was called The Drag, not because it was on any of the town's main arteries, but because, in catering to the high school trade, it was not permitted to sell anything fiercer than ginger ale. Most of the kids who came to hear Mr. A. and his too-terrific trumpet enjoyed griping that they were being treated as infants who couldn't wipe their own noses. Even the management, from time to time, had argued with the Liquor Authority that The Drag had a perfectly good reputation, and where would the harm be in selling beer to the youngsters? The Authority said the request was out of the question.

The Drag charged considerably more than it needed to for its tasteless sandwiches and soft drinks, and it discouraged its customers from lingering over small orders, but it still did excellent business during the school months. The chief attraction was August, a giant-sized musician whose four-piece but potent combo drew all the progressive jazz buffs in town to him. August, called only Mr. A. by the hipper crowd, never circulated with them, seldom left the stand, and cloaked himself in a kind of atonal mystery; he affected smoked

glasses and brought applause when he announced between sets that his listeners were the best in the world because they dug the important messages he was conveying through his trumpet.

Tonight, Tony stood at the front entrance, watched the kids letting themselves get buttered up by Mr. A's pronouncements, and marveled at how little hogwash it took to make them so gullible. The dimly lighted room was playing to capacity this evening, but the mesmerizing hush irritated him. He searched for familiar faces as Mr. A. stood at the microphone and croaked, "And now for only the hip—all others may cut out: We got that eminent poetess of Pokeyville, reading her latest masterpiece, 'The Big Switch.' "

He saw Joan Staples and Breckenridge at a table and noticed that the girl appeared a lot less tense than when he'd first seen her. He stayed in the entrance-way, shaking his head at a waiter who motioned that there was a seat ready for him, and regarded the horsy, oddly unhealthy looking woman materialize from a curtain next to the stage. The applause was ear-shattering as she waddled to the mike and nodded conspiratorially to Mr. A. The combo began to play rhythmically behind her, and she read melodramatically from a paper she plucked from her overripe bodice:

"The world was a world of Kings and men—
Once.

And we like hooded falcons.

Don't dig it anymore—don't dig

Such fancy tales.

Don't dig that old music
Without a fix.
But dig that crucifix. . .

"Ever been cold on a summer's night—
And coughed the blood of dawn?
Then you're hip to the big switch, friend."

The audience was rapt, Tony viewed as he weaved his way unobtrusively between the tables. As all the others were concentrating deeply on the poem, Joan furtively handed something to Breckenridge. Tony caught only a glimpse of it; it was money.

"The world's a world of dollar smokes
And where you find the loot?
The kings, they all pushin' weed—
I take me off my hood.
The grass is green no more—
Crazy, man, it's red.
The nights grow narrow, doll
You tune me in?"

The trumpet was getting sweeter and lower, and resinous ribbons of cigarette smoke wafted heavily over the room as the poetess became more impassioned. Tony kept his eyes on the table and saw J.I. pocket the cash. As Joan watched him carefully, J.I. rose, nodded, and headed for the door. He walked almost directly past Tony, but neglected to see him.

"The streets are wet—I got no shoes

You think there's a way to run . . .
Sure there is—the curve of the big
Switch, friend."

The performance was over and the poetess waddled off, apparently too overcome with emotion to respond to the applause. A new kind of music—this time with more or less of a beat—began, and several couples rose to move to the postage stamp-sized dance floor as a few of the lights went up. Joan sat alone, smoking contentedly, now looking neither from left to right, but obviously in a pleasurable, self-assured haze.

Some of the faces he recognized from school beamed at Tony as he kept ambling toward her table, and a few of the kids greeted him. The word had got around in the past two days that Baker was now the official president of The Wheelers and Dealers, and as he walked there was the image of celebrity about him. He winked at Mary Jane Andrews, the redhead he had half-heartedly promised to make his private chick, but otherwise kept ambling until he reached the important table.

"Fancy meeting us both here," he announced as he sat in Breckenridge's chair.

Joan Staples registered mild shock for only an instant. For the first time she smiled back at him, really smiled now, and impulsively reached over to squeeze his hand under the table.

"Well, you finally made it, didn't you?" she acknowledged. "I'd've never thought you to be the shy and retiring type of cat, but you sure took your time."

"Busy. Lots of State secrets." He returned the

squeeze, never releasing his gaze, and added, "To beam in on you straight, doll, I had the idea you weren't panting too hard for my company. Every time I saw you at school you were hanging onto Swift Arrow, and you didn't look too sad about it."

"Oh, J.I.," she sneered. "Strictly a nowhere. Don't ever let a thing like that bug you, Daddio. J. I. knows the score now. He won't say it, but he knows you're top man by now."

The room was dark and the frantic music from the stand blotted out a word here and there, but he was nearly positive that she was On. And that J.I. had cut out when he had to help put her more on. "Then you and I shouldn't hang around here with phony horses who recite phony poetry," he said. "We should make some tracks where we can really prove who the top man is."

"Gee, that sounds—" she began, still responding to the tight grasp but immediately sending up vague signs of being troubled. "Well, it sounds great, Tony. But not right now. I mean, I have to wait for someone."

He let the hand go. "Okay, forget the whole bit."

"No, I didn't mean—"

"Never mind." His eyes traveled around the room and he cautioned, "Wait. I'm feeling vibrations. The fuzz just came in." He paused and Joan straightened. "Feel the heat?" he asked.

"Cops?" she whispered, furtively glancing behind her.

Two young, husky, and seemingly average fellows wearing sport shirts and jackets were strolling between the tables, congenially nodding hellos to some of the

kids. They were slightly older looking than most of the habitués here, and Tony was sure it was important for Joan to know what he knew.

"I could spot them blindfolded," he said with disgust, "but most of the time I can smell them." He remained silent as the two men passed by and found their own table. Joan seemed fascinated.

"You really know your stuff, don't you?" she said admiringly. "You're right, too. Everybody knows about those two. They think they're kidding everyone, but we know they're fuzz straight from the peaches. We call them Dick Tracy and Charlie Chan." She faced Tony again. "Yep, you really do beam, Mr. Baker. I'm mighty proud to have held your hot hand."

"Then I repeat: what're we stashin' away time for in this cornball hall? The night outside ain't gonna get any darker."

The combo merged on a beautiful high note as Joan, again glancing nervously about, seemed to be figuring it all through. "All right," she nodded after a moment of hesitation. "Let's work it this way. I can drive away from here in a little less than a half hour—now don't get gruesome and ask for reasons—but I have to stay till then. You cut out and drive to Bankman Road. That's about a fifteen minute ride from here. Park right behind a tremendous Coca Cola sign you'll see there. When you see me coming up—I have a '58 Lincoln—watch for my blinkers, and then follow me. You got it?"

"Everything except where to find Bankman Road," he replied. "I'm very short in this country, remember?"

He watched her carefully as she gave him the ex-

plicit directions and lazily nodded when she suggested he cut out in a hurry.

"Why the rush?" he inquired without pressing too hard. "As a rule I never rush that fast, especially when a chick starts cracking whips."

"You goof," she declared affectionately. "I never crack whips. You'll be the one who'll crack 'em. And in only a half hour. I'll be right on time."

He got up and sauntered away. On the way out he saw Steve Bentley, the Tarzan boy with the school letter on his massive sweater. "Hyah, All American," said Tony.

Bentley nodded and held his arm. "I understand you're the new boss man of the Wheelers and Dealers, Baker."

"The same. You want my autograph?"

"Last week I was dealing with Breckenridge about the drag race we're planning for Monday night," Steve said. "I want to know who to see about it now—you or him?"

"Get logical, All American. I'm the new head, so I'm the man to see. My Wheelers and Dealers are ready to race you any time—as long as you make the loot worthwhile."

"Well, hell, we never talked about bets before, Breckenridge and I. . ."

"I'm on my way out now, champ. If you decide you're interested, and the bread sounds good to me, then I'll have my rods meet your Rangers. You can contact Petey Washburn. He's my secretary. Handles all my business." Tony walked away in the direction of

the door. "Dig you later, champ," he called back over his shoulder.

Joan blinked her headlights exactly forty minutes later.

Hardly five minutes after that they were both in the rear seat of her Lincoln and her mouth raised famishedly to his as he embraced her.

"Oh, Lord, but I thought this half hour would never end till I could get here," she said huskily, clutching at him tenaciously, greedily kissing his cheeks and lips and eyes as she pulled him closer. "Oh, Tony, man, I've been waiting and waiting for you forever! Oh, Tony man, let's take the flight!"

Hating himself, but knowing he couldn't back out, Tony responded. . . .

"You're not only running The Wheelers and Dealers," Joan said later as they huddled and faintly watched the stars from the window. "From now on, you have full authority to run Joan Staples, too. Man, there's never been a cat like you!"

Gently, Tony kissed her forehead as her fingers traced lovingly over the veins in his hand. "I don't remember ever asking for authority, kitten," he remarked. "Whether you dug it or not, I staked my claim on you that first day at school."

"I would've kept away even then, did you know that?" she maintained. "I mean, I ride fast and I don't have time to be bugged by squares. Do you know what did the trick? Tonight, at The Drag. When you sent

the vibrations my way. I could tell you knew the score."

"Which reminds me. Are you holding?"

"Sure. What do you think I made you wait all this time for before I showed? Do you want to blast? I have two in my purse. I was hoping for at least a half dozen or so to tide me over, but I've been so clean lately that I can't afford chewing gum."

"Let's see what you have," he instructed, withdrawing his hands as she fumbled through her bag. "I've been playing the connoisseur beat now for a year or so; I don't touch reefs that come out of the bargain basement. If they're good, then I'm hip."

Eagerly she offered him one and exclaimed, "Hey, that's a real bit—being able to tell one stick from another. I never could." Tony forced himself to make a great production of studying the cigarette as he flicked his lighter near it, of pretending to weigh it critically, of smelling it and rolling his eyes heavenward in contemplation. From the way her lovely eyes widened, he could tell he was making the whole production look more than impressive.

"Well?" she asked.

Tony shrugged and gave it back to her. "If you paid more than a dime for it," he maintained with an edge of boredom, "you got suckered, chicken."

"What're you handing me?" she protested, sitting up as though she'd been insulted. "This is the real goods. I kissed one on the way out here and it sets up the same old black magic." She was moving primly away from him now, nailing her attention to him, anxious for

the proof of authority. "What do you mean, it's no good?"

"Oh, it'll do for nice psalm singing boys and girls," he conceded. "But it sure isn't the genuine blaster." He turned to her, regarding the evident disappointment that had crept into her suddenly slackened expression. "Look, baby. I didn't mean to spoil your games. If you dig two-for-a-nickel weeds like this, then don't let me talk you out of anything. All I'm breezing you is that the smell is strictly from Farmer Zeke's outhouse and the texture is lumpy, like some coolies peddled it in a hurry to a close-out sale. Maybe it serves your purposes, but I dig good weed, weed that doesn't snap back. This can cork the bottom of the satchel without snuggling the last grail."

He watched her as she stared glumly at it, and wished he could know how she had taken to the lecture. Most of it was pure mumbo-jumbo and he was quite conscious of the fact that he understood little of what he'd said, either.

"Then you mean it's cheesy. . . , " she said hollowly. "It costs me a dollar a stick and it's still cheesy. . . ."

"That's about the best word for it." He waited. "What kind of contacts do you have, doll? I'm not interested in this phony sissy stuff. I'm new in town and I'm looking for good hemp and I have the gold to pay for it."

"Well, I—gee. . . ."

It was time, he decided, to really throw the sparklers. He drew the husky roll of bills from his pocket and made sure she could see the twenty on top.

"Like plenty of gold," he went on. "Suppose I lay some of this on you. Buy yourself some good stuff for

a change, not this stuff that cows leave behind them in the farmer's field?"

As her eyes continued to bug, Tony peeled off the first bill and kneaded it into her hand. "Here," he declared. "You be a straight chick and see what you can do, okay? Like say I'm a new boy in town. Get the word around that I want to buy."

The night remained still and the air outside was filling up gradually into a full pocket. He allowed himself only a moment to step outside the somehow ridiculous role of Tony Baker, delinquent from North High, Chicago, to examine the equally ridiculous role this otherwise pert, wonderfully formed blonde was playing. The tragedy was, of course, that she didn't know she was playing a role. She wasn't at all like the attractive blondes he'd dealt with in the past. They had been overwhelmingly geared toward destruction, so purposefully and consciously so that their performances had continuously bordered on the sadly comical. They had painted themselves to resemble the sexier sides of barns and they had dressed not as seductive women but as prominently bosomed freaks.

None of this corresponded to Joan Staples. She was still honestly pretty and bright; without the creaky crutch of the hemp, she would be able to blossom into a gracious maturity that would knock out the eyes of every guy in town.

If.

He recounted how many times in the past, when the chief had advised him of this one's suicide and that one's murder, that he'd told himself *If*. . . .

Oh, chief, he thought again; when are you going to

hand me an easy assignment, like wrestling tigers bare handed?

"I can do it," Joan Staples announced finally. "Are you free tomorrow? I'm having a party at my place. It's on Ridgeland—at the end of town; anyone can tell you where it is. I'm having a batch of kids over for swimming and lunch. You'll be able to make contacts there tomorrow for the very best."

"Crazy," he said admiringly.

"But this twenty. . .," she went on, holding it fast. "I guess I really shouldn't. I mean I've sort of hit low before, but I've never taken money before. Maybe I—Maybe it'd be better if you held onto this. . . ."

Zigzagging his Chesterfield into the ash tray, Tony grinned and embraced her again. "Hang onto it, doll, if it'll bring you some laughs. Never look a United States twenty in the mouth. And speaking of mouth, you owe me at least six or seven kisses."

He returned home on Seaton Street and was in bed by one o'clock. There was even gratefulness that his Aunt Gwen's bedroom light was out, which very likely meant that she was asleep and wouldn't come coasting in to fawn over him and tell him about her loneliness.

Gwen Dulaine had been the ointment's remotely troublesome fly from the beginning of the Santa Bello plan, and neither he nor the chief had been completely able to agree on how to deal with it, or her. As Tony Baker in Santa Bello, he had needed a place to stay, a place so legitimate that no one could infer he didn't belong there. Gwen, a fortyish shrew who was married to his father's brother, had agreed to take him in and play along with the game, if anyone were to ask her

to play. At the beginning, all of it had seemed exciting—right out of the cops and robbers on television—and she had appeared intelligent enough to go along with the masquerade.

But now he couldn't be wholly sure. The indoctrination had been as complete as possible, and she had come out almost perfectly in each of the complicated question and answer tests. Yet there had been the added and brutally unexpected problem of her own needs. Harry, her husband, was a salesman who traveled around the Southwest and rarely hit home. As she had advised him almost from the moment he had moved in, she was not built for being alone. And she had started her ruggedly subtle wiles on him from the beginning. "You're so awfully big and handsome, dear," she had exclaimed. "Isn't it a perfectly stinking shame that I have to be alone so much of the time?"

If he could keep her off his neck until the job was done, he thought as he moved restlessly over his bed, the chances were pretty good that this could be seen through.

If.

He was afraid, sharply, that he'd said *if* too often.

THE STAPLES ESTATE, surrounded by vast, loping hills, stood with a majestic and natural grace, as if it had been planted there. Its wonderfully free position in a high clearing just outside Santa Bello made it stand out commandingly; there was nothing tawdry about its image, thought Tony Baker as he strolled toward the swimming pool in his trunks, nothing to possibly connect it with the darker image of hemp.

Then he saw Joan Staples, poised high on the diving board. And a half dozen other kids, among another dozen of still others, who carried with them an almost visible sandwich board signifying that they knew what it was all about.

There was Doris Cartwright, for instance, the plush looking brunette he'd met just a half hour ago, after his first dip. She was certainly more stacked than any of the others, but she refused to leave the beach table near the pool, and refused to get out of her long sleeved dress and into a swimming suit. The furtive, frowning way she squinted, the curious way she stifled persistent yawns, and the long sleeves on this extremely hot day, stamped her beyond a doubt to Tony.

She was On, Tony was certain. And in a continually

yawning way that suggested she'd given up hemp as kid stuff a long time ago.

Leisurely, he strolled in Doris Cartwright's direction as Joan dove with unerring precision into the water and swam toward him. It was a brightly sunny day and the two servants who kept appearing with trays of Cokes and sandwiches returned again and again for more to feed the pack of guests who huddled close to the water and the nearby chairs. Good jazz records were being piped out from the pool house and there was the occasionally suspended feeling in the air that nothing could disturb the afternoon.

Tony sat at the side of the pool and dangled his feet in the water as Joan materialized to lift herself beside him and inquire, "You with it, stud?"

"Doll," he replied, looking her over appreciatively, "I'm thinking of taking a lease." He was conscious suddenly of the way her attention drifted to Doris, and he followed her as she moved to the beach table.

Doris, absorbed in some private anguish, didn't seem to see them approach. But she glanced up in a kind of subtle terror as Joan asked, "What gives, Doris?"

The girl kneaded her knuckles into her temples and confessed, "I'm burning up!"

Joan seemed solicitously concerned and sat next to her. "You just had the shivers a few minutes ago. I'll—get you a cold malt. You wait here." Tony followed her toward the rear of the house as three or four jokers resumed friendly heckling of Doris, who obviously didn't want to play.

"Hey, keed," Tony heard one of them shout, "you haven't been in the water in weeks! Hey, gang, whad-

daya say we escort Doris into the pool so's she can cool off?" And another one shouted even more loudly, "Aw, let her alone! Quit teasin' and cool off yourself!"

In the enormous Staples kitchen, Joan started to work at the portable bar, expertly pouring the malt ingredients into the mixer and turning on the switch. "She a friend of yours?" Tony asked absently, observing the way her bubbling over had diminished; she was worried now, just this side of being scared.

"Yes," she nodded, looking luscious even in the soggily wet two-piecer. "Gee, Tony, what do you think it is—cold turkey? I—well, I've never seen Doris like this. Or anyone . . ."

"Who cares?" he shrugged. "I got more to do than weep over hops who don't know how to watch out for themselves. You said I'd make a score here today. So where's the action?"

"I—" She paused for a moment, as though she couldn't be perfectly sure of whether the subject should be that swiftly changed or not. Then she gave in and said, "Check Jukey Jarrow. He's the cat out there nuzzling around Karen McMasters—you know, the one you said makes Jayne Mansfield look like a newborn."

"What kind of broker is he?"

"Strictly a hard-nose," Joan answered, pouring the malt into a large glass and switching off the mixer. "He wouldn't even lay a deuce on me when I begged for it."

"Okay, give me an intro to the bastard and I'll hitch up the reindeers for you."

"Well, I'll—" she began, just before the bomb dropped.

The kitchen door burst open and Doris Cartwright,

soaked through and through, rushed toward Joan, sobbing hysterically and pleading to be left alone. Her dress was half torn. "They don't understand!" she cried. "They don't understand!"

Tony lunged to the door and ordered the five grinning hyenas there to get the hell away. He slammed it shut and returned to the girl, just in time to feel a little sick because of what he saw.

Both sleeves of her dress had been ripped open. The inner sides of her elbows were heavily marked with sores, scabs, scar tissue and the repeated markings of hypodermic injections.

"Please don't let them get me," she breathed, embracing Joan.

Joan's eyes were nailed to the sores in pious horror.

After a critical moment he was able to rouse Joan to find a coat and a way to get the still hysterical girl home.

"I—didn't understand it all," she whispered later, still partially numbed. "I thought she was only a weedhead, like me. I mean I—I knew she'd been playing with the needle, but I thought it was—I—those scabs on her arms . . ."

"She graduated," Tony remarked as if he were almost amused by the whole thing. "She flaked around enough with the weed to let her land up with the big stuff. It has to happen, doesn't it, doll?"

He reached out for her. "And what the hell does it matter? So she has some rough spots here and there. Look at all the kicks she gets. Right? Don't get emotional, whatever you do. If you're ever gonna get kicks

out of life, you sure as hell can't afford to get emotional. . . ."

The implacable revulsion in her eyes as she stared up at him caused him to hold her even more tightly. He even managed a laugh.

2

The meet that night with Jukey Jarrow was simple. It happened in the very last row of Santa Bello's drive-in theatre, where an ancient Astaire and Rogers movie was playing to an unseeing audience. The drive-in was crowded to capacity, but the teenagers weren't looking, because the teenagers were necking. Tony steered his car through the darkened lot slowly and quietly and became persuaded of the absolute fact: not one couple appeared to be watching the movie.

Jarrow wasn't happy when Tony pulled up in the empty space beside his Buick and slipped out to turn off the speaker. "Hey, what's the idea?"

"You know me, Jarrow; Baker. I got one question. You holding?"

The girl in Jarrow's puny arms disentangled herself and nervously swept her palms up over her hair. She did her best to give the impression of concentrating on Fred Astaire.

"I don't dig you," Jarrow declared uneasily.

"I'm looking for some grass to graze on."

"You're 'way out, man. I don't sound you nohow. And you're interrupting the picture for my friend here. Suppose you—"

"Joan told me you could straighten me out. I want to

score like the Yanks." He worked to make the wooden grin as noticeable as possible in the night's dimness.

The name cut the proper ice and Jukey Jarrow gradually sat up. "Joan told you?" he inquired with utmost caution.

Tony nodded. "She told me you and Mary Jane were going steady."

The news hit Jarrow's girl with the precision of a polished hammer and she insisted on knowing who Mary Jane was. Jarrow managed to ease her out of the car by exclaiming that she, and no one else, was his doll and that if she'd cut out fast to powder her nose in the nearest john while he had a business conference, he'd prove to her how much of a solid chick she was to him later on.

"All right," she pouted as she finally agreed to leave. "But I'm not used to this being kicked out of a boy's car. And especially when the movie's getting so good."

"Man, you've been treating Joan pretty rough," Tony said, leaning forward so that Jarrow wouldn't miss a word. "In her condition, she's crappy advertising for someone who's pushing the stuff."

Jarrow provided the artificial smile that looked characteristic. "I'm all tears," he declared. "If she don't bake, she don't get dusted." Then his jaw set and he examined Tony gravely. "What about Mary Jane?"

"I could use five pounds."

He paused for a moment. "Five pounds? Man, I don't carry nothing like that. Just a couple of sticks at a time. You know what I mean—to fix up a few of the heads at school. I'm no big operator."

"Joan thinks you are."

"Nah, she's got me figured wrong. What can you expect from a confirmed weedo?"

Showing sharp disappointment, Tony retreated a few inches from the rolled down window. "So that's it. I thought I'd be able to score a can." He waited. "But I'll settle for a stick or two, if that's all you have."

Jukey Jarrow left the door open as he got out, letting it serve as a shield from prying eyes, and took a long wire from his sun visor to the rear of the Buick. Tony followed. He reached up into the back fender and scraped around with the wire until a small metal container fell to the ground.

Tony moved in more closely to watch. The container was a magnetic box, the kind that was often used to hold extra sets of keys. Playing the casual broker for all it was worth, the cadaverously skinny Jarrow brought out two sticks of marijuana from the can and placed the can back under the fender.

"Hey, that's a pretty good gimmick you got there," Tony said admiringly as he took the sticks. "Magnetic box, huh?"

"That's right," Jarrow nodded coldly, "and let's save the conversation for another day. That'll be a buck a stick."

Up on the leviathan screen, Astaire was doing his marvelously loose-gaited shuffle toward the side of the ship as Ginger Rogers pounced after him, shouting that she loved him, after all. Someone laughed out loud and someone else in another second yelled for him to shut up.

Tony bore down hard on Jarrow, as he paid. "This

is all very pleasant, wasting my time on penny-ante stuff," he said, "but when do I meet the ace man?"

Jarrow surveyed him. "You're really out for the big dollar business, huh?"

"I'm out for Number One if that's what you mean, yeah."

Astaire broke into a number before Jarrow finally shuffled, in unconscious imitation, back to his wheel. He closed the door after him, glanced around again for possible observers, and beckoned to Tony who peered at him.

"The gas is going around that you're okaying a drag race match with Creepo Bentley of the Beaver Patrol on Monday night," Jarrow said. "That right?"

"That's very possible."

Nodding, Jarrow offered him a Pall Mall. "Dig. So hang on tight till Monday night. The ace man will have a can for you—ready, able and willing to be paid. And paid good. I'll spread the word. He'll find you."

"Sounds good," Tony replied, patting the two sticks in his pocket.

3

The preparations for the drag race were ironed out within thirty minutes. They would meet for action at Clarkstar Strip at nine o'clock on the nose. Tony would take the lead rod, Breckenridge would drive the second, and Hugger Washburn, Petey's brother, would steer the third for the Wheelers and Dealers. Steve Bentley would lead his own Rangers, and Kirby and Reardon would follow. All the Santa Bello juniors and seniors

who could be trusted would be there, on the sidelines, and they would take care of their own bets. Both Tony and Bentley agreed to a one hundred dollar overall bet between themselves. Petey took over from there and cut all of his afternoon classes to arrange for the night race to go smoothly.

By a quarter of nine, Tony had begun to sweat. He had been cocky throughout the day and had assured everyone who'd come close to him that he and his boys would make minced pie out of The Rangers. He was sure he'd brought off the masquerade of bored self-confidence.

But now he was driving toward Clarkstar, where a pack of thrill-nutty kids would be waiting for him to prove that he was twice as thrill-nutty as they, and he was scared. Joan Staples, wriggling next to him, wasn't helping at all. They'd spent an uncomfortable half hour with her parents at that effectively unpretentious estate. Her father, a friendly enough guy who'd pressed down a little too hard to indicate that he considered himself and his wife buddies rather than parents to Joan, had listened to Joan tell him what a lovely night it was going to be for a movie. But once in the car, after Tony had driven down the private driveway and out onto the dirt road, she'd switched the pose immediately. She'd pulled a stick from her bra, lighted up, and by now she was acting goofy as hell.

She was expecting him to be The Giant Killer tonight, too.

"You sure you don't want to turn on, baby?" she invited, linking her hand under his arm. "Maybe it'll prop you up a little more for the race."

"Not now," he answered evenly. "I'm strictly business tonight. And take it easy with that weed, will you? You're stinking up the upholstery."

"My, aren't we acting tough this evening?" Her hand withdrew only a little, as though she'd been singed, but it returned again, as admiringly as ever. Joan had latched onto him like a kid in love since the night on Bankman Road; on Saturday, when she'd come back to life after unnervedly seeing to it that Doris Cartwright had got safely home, she'd revived in a big way and announced to Tony that he was her man, and in spades. It was as if Breckenridge had never existed.

He could see the dim beams of lights and hear the muffled excitement of many voices even before he turned off the road to head for Clarkstar Strip. They hadn't been kidding when they'd agreed to begin at nine on the button. Petey had organized the Wheelers and Dealers' cars in a professional looking line, and he and a few others in the Wheelers' lackey squad were busily tuning up, primping the rods, dancing about eagerly as the sideliners took their places, ready for blood.

It was an almost starless night and everyone had been warned to keep the lights doused as low as possible; there was no assurance that the cops wouldn't come patrolling tonight and try to cut in on their fun. Tony had driven out here to Clarkstar yesterday and studied the entire Strip. It wasn't going to be easy, he thought again for certainly the dozenth time. The Strip was a dangerous road, even for those who'd raced over it before, and it probably was worrying even old timers like Bentley and J. I.

It sure isn't giving me the light and free feeling, he told himself as he steered his car in the direction of The Wheelers' area, but I'm dead for sure the second anyone here scents I'm the least bit scared. The training course I took for this job before I hit Santa Bello was supposed to be the most complete of its kind. But there had been no classes on risking your damn fool neck in drag races.

Here goes something, I hope, he thought as Petey hurried over to open his door. It would have helped a little, he decided, if Joan weren't as greased up with enthusiasm as she obviously was. She was sailing now, as if she could beat The Rangers down the Strip, and without a car.

Steve Bentley, soberly tuning up his heap as Tony passed by, moved to The Wheelers and Dealers' banner and jerked his head to move Petey away. "I'm taking over now, cat," he said. "Buzz out for a couple minutes and see what the bets look like."

Tony lifted the hood and went to work, glad to let Ace-man, whoever he was, see that there wouldn't be any interruptions. He didn't have long to wait. He heard someone approach slowly from behind and confide, "Jukey tells me you're looking for something, Baker. Is that right?"

The voice belonged to J. I.

Tony did his best to check his surprise, and was fairly certain he'd failed. "You trying to tell me you're my connection?" he asked quietly.

Breckenridge was enjoying it. "I'm holding, man," he drawled. "Got any complaints?" Tony managed a shrug

and J. I. started toward his own car. "Okay, let's play follow the leader."

As they walked, J. I. lit a cigarette and flicked the match directly in front of Tony. "For my memory book," he declared. "The great Tony Baker with egg on his face."

"Stick to business," Tony ordered. "How many sticks you got to sell?"

"A hundred."

"Only a hundred?" Tony asked, making his disappointment evident. "What kind of two-bit club did I get the intro to?"

"Cool it, man," Breckenridge said. "And it'll cost you a hundred."

"Now wait, you ivy-covered flunkie," Tony snapped, stopping for a moment. "That's the retail price. I'm in this game for profit, not for laughs. I stopped laughing long ago."

"Fair enough," came the easy reply. "I just wanted to see how hip you are. It's seventy-five a stick."

"I always paid only sixty."

"Tough. The price went up just last night. You can charge a buck and a quarter from now on, chief; the heat's on around this hicko."

"Heat never bothers me."

"That's impressive as hell, sport, but you know what the rap is in this state for pushing the stuff? Five years to life."

Tony frowned as the crowds were beginning to get impatient. "I'm all tears," he notified. "Make it sixty-five and I'll also pick up all the caps you got."

It made J. I. appear a trifle uncomfortable. "Caps?"

he repeated, his voice slightly lighter now. "I'm not pushing hard stuff. You got your information cock-eyed."

They got to his car and J. I. warily refused to budge. Tony tasted the tension. "Maybe I can make a better deal in some place else," he said.

Breckenridge regarded him appraisingly. "You better buy your stuff from me, friend," he instructed shortly. "Mr. A. doesn't like to be bugged."

It was the first time the name of the Drag man had been brought up, and Tony struggled to keep casual. "Yeah, but who set the price at seventy-five—you or Mr. A.?"

"I'm only a traveling salesman," J. I. answered with a hollow laugh. "I make deliveries, pick up the dough, and get my ten percent. So don't gripe my time. You want it, or do you want it? Speak up and fast, friend. The yokels are straining back there, waiting to see you make like a hero in your kiddie car."

"All right. I got no yen to bug Mr. A. What's good enough for him is good enough for me."

"Now you're coming on like a sensible schoolboy," Breckenridge remarked approvingly and opened his car door. Sliding in, he mentioned for Tony to get in with him. When the doors were closed, J. I. opened the glove compartment, skillfully reached up to the top of it, and brought down a specially made metal drawer. He took five packs from it and handed them to Tony, who just as skillfully slipped them into a waterproof plastic bag.

The impatience was getting louder at the sidelines as Tony stuffed the bag into his jacket. He drew his wad

of bills from a pocket and peeled some of them off for J. I.

"Man, you sure got the bread. . . ."

"There's lots more, Uncle," Tony said, "if you forget this kid stuff after tonight and latch me onto some H, coke and goof balls."

The hesitation was noticeable. "I only work here."

"Okay, then, work here," Tony replied, getting out. "In the meantime, I have loot ready to make a lot of hungry jokers happy."

Except for Breckenridge, no one seemed to be watching him as he moved in the darkness to his own hot rod. Pretending to give it the final once over, he bent down, glancing around carefully once more, and unscrewed one of the tailpipes, the dummy one he'd worked on last night, and stuffed the plastic bag in place into it.

The motors were revving and the voices were shouting for him to snap it up. He screwed the tailpipe back into place and rose to dust his hands. He sauntered to the front of the rod, nervously prepared for the involuntary suicide he knew was on its way.

Otherwise, everything looked perfectly normal. The high school games were about to begin.

4

He discovered Joan in the seat next to the steering wheel and angrily he ordered her to get the hell out, but she refused. "I'm not chicken like the others," she exclaimed, and there was an increasingly unnatural animation about her. "Let's roll! I'll see to it that we

win, baby!" Every eye was watching and Tony poised at the wheel. There was nothing to do but let her stay and pray that they'd both come back with the same number of limbs they were starting out with.

The gun sounded and the souped up cars blasted off as the sideliners yelled for their favorites. The rubber burned quickly as Tony found himself in fourth position, with Breckenridge hardly inches ahead of him. Steve Bentley had zoomed forward with ease from the start. Fiercely aware of the wheel in front of him, Tony was conscious again of the madness, of the crowds screaming for blood, of his own screwball cheek in vying with obvious experts like Bentley and Breckenridge. The night became even darker as the cars shot away from the Clarkstar starting point, and Tony could feel the dirt springing for his mouth. The noise of motors became deafening.

Joan was having the time of her life, screaming her delight even above the earsplitting sounds and he struggled to nudge her away as her foot pressed down firmly over his own foot on the accelerator. The wild screeching of brakes around him and the hysterical cry of tires against asphalt diverted him for an instant as his rod suddenly forged ahead. The other cars increased their speed, too, and again the noise was painfully all-encompassing. The race hardly had begun but the acceleration of every rod had already passed any logically safe limit, even for madmen.

Her foot remained where it was until, with a burst of panicky violence he kicked it away, regretfully positive that he had hurt her, that he had caused stinging pain. Once more she attempted to come back, to push

her foot down again, but he kicked it again as he yelled a furious oath at her, an oath she couldn't possibly hear. It was vital to keep his eyes on the road ahead. He didn't dare take a look at her, but he didn't need to. Her fevered excitement was a passion not to be seen or heard but to be felt; he felt it briskly as her supple body jogged against him each time he took a new and more precarious curve.

From what seemed to be only an inch away, Mitch Reardon of the Rangers grabbed an abrupt lead, but then Breckenridge appeared again, gaining, and cut in between him and Tony. Like a no-holds-barred lunatic, J. I. swerved in front of Reardon, forcing him to careen off the strip. Reardon's rod lost control despite a frantic attempt to get to his brakes in time, and crashed resoundingly into a tree.

Bentley's car raced up behind J. I.'s as Joan again pressed her foot against Tony's. "Let's make it a real thrill, Daddio!" she shouted as it plunged ahead, crazily streaking into an incredibly small opening between J. I. and Bentley. The three rods were almost locked now, fearsomely hub to hub.

"Now we'll show them!" Joan screamed, hurtling against him, trying to grab the wheel from him. Somehow he managed to push her back but within the flick of a second lost slight control of his wheel. The horrid sound of screeching brakes and screaming tires built and he knew that the crazy Staples kid hadn't given in yet. Laughing like a grasshead now, she made another determined lunge and this time successfully caught her hands around the wheel, forcing Tony to swerve into the rod on their right. The frightening

sound of metal plowing into metal charged up into the voluptuous night. The sideliners' yells were almost distinct as Tony watched his car ramming into Bentley's, throwing up huge clouds of dust.

Almost dizzily now, he knew he'd had enough. He brought the rod to a stop as they approached the final length of the strip and waited for his breath to return. Just as he turned in fury to the girl, the night was suddenly lighted by the glare of unfamiliar cars. A rumble had started already among the crowds, and he could hear, "The law! Everybody beat it!" He wondered if he would ever breathe normally again.

The highway was a scramble of cars. The police pulled up to the drag strip and immediately surrounded the three head rods. A flurry of fear flashed over the sideliners as they scrambled, too, to get to their own cars and escape. Joan was still shouting her demands for action and Tony knew it was time to make a run for it.

Shoving his rod into reverse, he made a fast turn and raced toward the road block which the police had already set up. Then he realized that it wasn't going to work, and he was grateful. He skidded and nearly plowed into the block as he slammed on the brake.

The cops were instantly swarming toward him and he made a reverse again. But this time there was the scrunch of metal against more metal. Peering over the side of the rod, he saw the tailpipe breaking off against the police's squad car, and watched the plastic bag of marijuana fall into the roadside dirt.

One patrolman practically wrestled the wheel away

from him and another patrolman killed his ignition as he heard the penetrating sound of a police siren from off in the distance. The first cop dragged him out of the rod and frisked him.

The second retrieved the bag from the ground.

"Take him in!" called the police sergeant, lumbering forward. "Take all the cruddy bastards in!"

The visit to Clarkstar Strip was over. As Tony and Joan joined the other kids being herded into the still appearing wagons, the red lights on the squad cars seemed to get brighter. The sirens seemed to sound louder.

5

The admittance room of the Santa Bello jail was a madhouse as thirty-one of the boys were brought to the front desk, as the sergeant on duty listened to the arresting officers' official complaint. The patrolmen did their best to maintain some resemblance of order as they rustled the shouting, singing, bawdily joking, arrogant kids into line. They searched the boys, barking orders as they did so, and the boys responded by jeering, laughing, blithely cursing.

"Hey, Wyatt Earp," Tony suggested to the policeman who patted him down. "How about you and me shooting it out?"

"Cut it out, sonny boy," replied the cop, showing no signs of being fazed, "or make a break for it. I've got all the authority in the world to shoot you in the back of the head."

"Oh, I dig," chuckled Tony. "A hero. Straight from television."

Not all of the boys were defiant. A third of them, obviously frightened by an experience they hadn't bargained for, obeyed and even showed contempt for both Baker and Breckenridge. But the rest, masking their own fright more cleverly, continued the big jeer, the talking back and the pretension of good humored outrage, as they laughed at the officers and let them know the whole party was fun.

Even Steve Bentley, who looked more banged up than any of the others, joined in the wolf whistles when the door near the front desk opened and a police woman emerged. Unwittingly she left the door opened long enough for most of the boys to see at least a dozen of the arrested girls, in various states of undress, being frisked by another set of matrons. Some of the girls, acutely embarrassed, hurried to cover themselves and leap out of eyeshot, but the majority of them apparently were as pleased as the boys; they giggled loudly and delightedly as the boys howled. The matron, realizing what she'd done, quickly closed the door, scowled at the howlers, and marched off to another room, muttering something indistinguishable under her breath.

The processing over, all the boys were instructed to head for the huge door at the desk's left, and the cops helped themselves to a rough push now and then when a youngster dragged his feet too leisurely for comfort. Tony, momentarily concerned that the club members and sideliners might be forgetting him in the confusing shuffle, forced the policeman nearest him to let him stop long enough to call out, "Listen, you cats, play it

cool! Demand your rights! Don't give the gawddamn stinking fuzz the right time! Don't—"

But he was angrily hustled away before he could finish, and just before he caught sight of Joan's father, looking irate enough to consider bursting at least two blood vessels. Staples stormed into the Admittance Room with another man and bound toward the front desk.

"You idiotic, tin horn flatfoots!" he raged as the man with him, a lot more controlled, handed the sergeant a paper that looked impressive enough to be a legal document. "Just what in the hell do you think you're doing to me?"

The sergeant glanced over the paper and nodded to the nearest patrolman who carried it into the girls' detention room. "To you?" the sergeant asked defensively. "I'm not doing anything to *you*, Mr. Staples. It's just that—"

"Don't apologize, you imitation copper!" Staples cut in, his voice as purposely abusive as it could sound. "The harm's been done! I'll sue for false arrest and I'll get your name and badge along with it! I'll have you tossed off this force so fast you'll be reeling for the rest of your stupid, inconsequential life! Get my daughter out of that pesthole right away or I'll personally rip that junior G-Man badge off you, do you hear?"

Joan Staples ran to her father as soon as the door pulled back. The tears of innocence as she hastened into his arms proved that she had been unjustly accused, and he railed against the sergeant with all the imperious force at his command. "You cheap cops,

making life miserable for innocent children," he cried. "What the hell are you doing here on your well-paid behinds? Why the hell aren't you out catching criminals instead of preying on children?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Staples," the sergeant said, obviously working for politeness. "We got a tip on this drag race. When we found the marijuana, well, sir, that's a very serious—"

"That's cheap detective book nonsense!" the father interrupted. "These kids would never touch the stuff. This is all the doing of your harebrained police commissioner who's running for some harebrained office. Well, I'll see that he gets sent back to the dump heap, along with the rest of you cheap dollar an hour fat-heads!" He glared at the man next to him and bellowed, "Wingate, file suit against the Police Commissioner the first thing tomorrow morning!" Then he comforted the weeping Joan as he led her away and soothed, "Don't cry baby. You poor kid. . . ."

The desk sergeant watched them leave. He shook his head tiredly at the patrolman who commented on the exhibition by emitting the most practical of four-lettered words.

"If you're figuring on clobbering him, save your strength," the sergeant declared. "He's only the first of a pack. They'll all be in here soon, or at least the ones who give a damn about their kids. They'll be hopping on our keesters, yapping, 'No, not my child, it's a mistake!' They won't believe the gawddamn awful truth until it's too late. Then all of a sudden it'll be too late and they'll come in and call us dollar an hour bastards because we didn't warn them in time."

"Forget it, Claffey, and save your strength," he added as he listened to the animal roar of jeers from the other room. "If we don't keep our balance, those little sons of bitches in there'll be taking over in time. And their parents'll be joining the parade."

Tony was bailed out less than an hour later by a well-dressed but obdurately seedy-looking lawyer named William Remington Kane. He was fiftyish, his breath was a fume of subtle bourbon, and as they walked out into the night air he urged Tony to go on home.

"Solid," nodded Tony, "but what's the score? How come I'm your client?"

Kane appeared bored, certainly unruffled. "There's no need to ask any questions at all. Wend your way home, son, or whatever rattrap you call a home. And keep all the questions to yourself."

"Yeah, but how're you going to get the judge to turn me loose?" Tony persisted.

"We'll come to that at the right time," Kane answered, screwing a cigarette into a holder. "I'll do my best to convince him that it's a weak case against you; that you come from a broken home, and all that usual, ordinary crap."

Conscious of the disdain, Tony decided to let it ride. "I've heard about you," he acknowledged. "I guess I've got to thank Mr. Staples for having such an important lawyer."

"Staples?" Kane repeated, sophisticatedly furrowing his brow. "Dear me, no. I merely followed the in-

structions of—an associate.” He was about to turn away. “And now, good morning.”

But Tony spun him around. “Don’t play games with me, Kane! Your tailor looks real nifty on you, but I still want to know: who’s my fairy godmother?”

The question merely served to amuse the lawyer and he suavely freed himself from the grip. “Don’t kid me, buster,” he directed sociably. “You must know I work for Mr. A.”

Then William Remington Kane walked to his car and drove away.

IN THE SCHOOL CORRIDOR the next morning, Tony reached for J. I.'s arm and announced, "I want to see Mr. A."

J. I. regarded him with almost the same tone of amusement that Kane had shown only hours before. Suddenly the organized jockeying for position ended when J. I. remarked with the first full indication of superiority, "You sure want to move up fast, don't you, big chief?"

"Don't worry about me getting into your list," Tony exclaimed. "I got no time for buck and a half deals. I want the hard stuff, and pronto. You help me, and without the sass, and I'll cut you in."

The directive worked. Breckenridge paused a moment, nodded as though he had been tentatively impressed, and said, "Dig you. I'll see what I can do," just before both of them saw Mrs. Williams approach. Breckenridge sauntered off.

Alice Williams frowned at Tony, letting him know she'd been told everything of what had happened last night. "You could've been hurt or even killed," she complained, looking prettier than he'd ever seen her. "You're not stupid, Tony. I know that. Is it worth

risking your neck just to be fawned over by a few fat-headed teenagers?"

Tony grinned. "I didn't risk a thing, teach'. I can drive. Any time you're ready for a demonstration, let me know."

"How well can you drive," she urged, "when you're all hopped up with marijuana?"

It hurt, and he wondered how long he could go on posing for her. Maybe she was concerned about him because it was her business to be concerned, he thought, but maybe there was something deeper; maybe she'd looked past his juvenile talk and foolish actions and seen more substance than he'd meant for her to see.

He spoke levelly. "It says some place that a man's innocent until he's proven guilty."

"Marijuana *was* found near your car."

"Aw, the cops always plant the stuff in order to make arrests. And anyway," he added, testing her, "what does it matter so much for?"

"I wanted to help you, Tony. But the only one who can really help you is yourself."

At the far end of the corridor he could see Sigurdson and MacDonald, on their way to the first class. They had made an abrupt change in their feeling for him since the afternoon he'd met them outside the gym with a shiv. Now they were Baker rooters, and all the way. The word had got around fast and smoothly: Tony Baker dealt in H. You had to be a big man for that.

Then there was the solemn, untextured feeling that he was friendless, that those who would have backed him up till the first whistle of a cop weren't nearly

enough for him, even though he'd gone into this dirty job with his eyes open. He surveyed Alice Williams, trying desperately to gauge how well she could be trusted. He dove into the pool, head first.

"Alice," he said softly, quickly, abandoning every vestige of Tony Baker the stemwinding creep. The voice was gentle, adult, and confiding, and he saw how swiftly she responded. "Alice, please trust me. I—hope I'll be able to explain all of this one of these days. Right now I—"

MacDonald and Sigurdson were still yards away from him and the corridor was filling, but he noticed a wink, aimed at him and only feet away, from one of last night's sideliners who'd escaped before the police had arrived. Unaware of them, Alice Williams stood erect, concentrating on Tony fully now, eager to hear more.

But he interrupted himself with a flip, "Plant you now, teach'," and strolled to meet MacDonald and Sigurdson and walk with them. They beamed. Plenty of the onlookers were looking at them enviously. After all, they were friendly with Tony Baker.

2

Mr. A. never worked the early gigs on Tuesday nights, but this evening The Drag was doing better than fair business, nevertheless. Tony and Joan sat at a rear table, now and then sipping from the flask Tony sneaked from his pocket, and listened restlessly to the combo coolly sail through *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*. Joan was momentarily miffed. Minutes ago she'd taken a stick from her purse and had been in

the process of lighting it, when Tony had slapped it from her lips and warned her to wise up in a hurry; kicks were the end, he'd argued, but not when they courted fuzz trouble.

Now the mood was a darkly silent one and Tony knew he would have been on the precipice of getting up and leaving, if he hadn't been alerted that tonight would be the action night, the night when his job would be over.

Tomorrow night he would be on his way from Santa Bello. As he distantly noticed Kane spotting him and heading for his table, he decided he wasn't sure any longer whether the exit from Santa Bello would be horizontal or vertical.

"May I have the next waltz?" Kane smiled pleasantly as he reached them. He looked a little younger than he had in the jail's admittance room last night, a trifle more subdued, and Tony decided it was because he was a little less sober than he'd been last night. His fleshy cheeks were flushed, his eyes were watery, and he moved with a kind of detachment which shuttled between absolute authority and a mild willingness to please.

"Hi, Kane," greeted Tony, sitting up and indicating the empty chair opposite his. "Join us for a drink?" He didn't bother to make introductions. It wouldn't have mattered much, anyway; Joan was still remotely riled because of the restricting way he'd treated her. Too, he didn't want to keep Kane standing too long, where any interested party would be able to get a better than useful look.

The lawyer sat, nodded crisply at the sulking Joan,

and replied, "Don't mind if I do. The whistle does get a bit dry by this time of night; I'm convinced it has something to do with this Western climate. But we have only five minutes, Tony. Then we've got to be going."

"Going?" Joan complained, pingponging her eyes at both of them. "You didn't say anything about going. . . ."

"Just Mr. Kane and me for an hour, doll," Tony said. "Legal details. You just sit here and get mellow—for me. I'll be back here before you can say Yardbird." He kissed Joan's forehead and rose. "I'm going to pick up some cigarillos. You and Kane have a drink, baby, and I'll see you soon." He nodded to Kane, pantomimed to the attorney that a scorned woman has more fury in her than hell, and walked casually out of the main room.

He kept the same purposeful gait even after he was out of Kane's eyeshot. He walked to the men's room and, once inside, waited impatiently. He would be joined, he'd been told, by a man named Pat Higgins, posing as a waiter.

There was less than a half minute's wait. A white-jacketed man entered the small room as Tony repeatedly washed his hands. The waiter advanced to the adjoining washbowl, turned on a faucet and almost as quickly turned it off again. Tony did the same. The rapport established, both men played at washing their hands, talking in whispers, hardly looking at each other.

"Got the tools?" asked Pat Higgins.

"Up my sleeve," Tony nodded.

"Money?"

"Yeah. But I still don't know where Kane's taking me."

"We'll be around."

Higgins dried his hands on a paper towel as two customers came in, and walked the way a waiter should walk toward the door.

William Remington Kane sipped his coffee—anything was preferable to those dismal soft drinks they featured around here, even this disgusting brown dish-water—and consoled himself that there was almost a full fifth in the rear seat of the limousine outside. It would make the laborious ride downtown a trifle less grim. There were no ice buckets or paper cups in that car, but then Baker didn't appear to him to be the kind of co-rider who would demand niceties.

Attempting pleasant small talk with the Staples girl was impossible, and he gave up after an innocuous question or two. He rather regretted taking Baker away from her company this evening, even if she did seem to be the pouting, petulant type. She was terribly attractive and unforgiveably young, and he was sure that Baker, himself young and handsome, was on considerably more than a kissing acquaintance with her.

Oh, yes, no mountains were too high to climb when you were that beautifully and obnoxiously young. When you were a youngster you could tell the loveliest girl in the state that you intended to spend the night with her and she wouldn't dream of questioning your cheek, because you were a youngster. It was different when you were fifty-five years old. One brutally hell of a lot different. At fifty-five, and loathed by anyone

who recognized your name, you had to pay for whatever love was available, and pay well unless you were willing to settle for a crone equally fifty-five. And even so it would be love by the stopwatch, gross and mannered and filled with all the odious clichés. And still they would hate you.

Against the distressingly heathen music blasting from the stage of this pitiful little club, she was sulking, in the way only a delicious young blonde could sulk without becoming automatically offensive. She didn't know who he was and, what's more, she didn't even care.

Her father would care, though. Ah, yes, Jack Staples, that revoltingly successful selfmade banker whose bone structure was lined with cash would care. He would recognize William Remington Kane's name, because he'd lived in this unchangeably hick town for longer than twenty-five years. He would remember that William Remington Kane had once been Santa Bello's most appreciable luminary, a local boy who'd started out wearing the mantle of the greatest lawyers before him. He would recall that after six sterling years as the most talked-about and admired criminal lawyer in the United States, William Remington Kane had ended the celebration by pulling out a butcher's knife and stabbing his wife sixteen times because she had been unfaithful to him.

Staples, a practical and dourly unimaginative man, wouldn't remember the short prison term, the fact that the promised disbarment never came, and that William Remington Kane was now noted in Santa Bello for defending pimps, madames and dope sellers. And Staples,

who prided himself on being a churchly man, would be ready to demand an injunction because his darling tramp of a blonde, attractive daughter was sitting at the same table with William Remington Kane.

"You have real business with Tony?" the girl petulantly inquired suddenly, eyeing him with disdain. "Are you going to keep him long?"

"Not long at all, my dear," he soothed; the liquid voice, at least, had not yet gone back on him. "I regret this intrusion as much as you do. But I assure you: it's quite important."

The liquor in the limousine beckoned and he hoped Baker wouldn't take too long. It had been only the liquor, dulling his senses and casting a comfortable film over them, that had helped him survive the years, particularly the past three years when he'd descended into what he'd laughingly described to his club members as The Dope Business. The money was a trace dirty, perhaps, but most certainly welcomed. Every greasy gentleman with filthy ambitions in this part of the state had been hiring him, if dope was involved. It paid wonderfully well. At odd moments he had let himself wonder what his reactions would be if he'd had children of his own, children available to the traffic of dope which he, in effect, was paid to defend.

But it didn't hurt quite so much, of course, because he didn't have children. He didn't even have friends. He did have the bottle out in the limousine, though, and that was a relative tranquilizer.

Never hold back evidence, the law books had insisted, even before William Remington Kane had been born. It was a ridiculous directive, of course. How could

you possibly win a case, if you were hated by the world and yourself, unless you held back evidence? There were the pitiable scrawny children who were dead because, although they argued that injections made them sure and positive and self-contained, there had been the moment of control loss—only a moment but certainly enough of one—when their sense of direction had tentatively got out of whack and they'd taken that one fix, the one which had killed them. Them, the youngsters who had been assured that fatal accidents were restricted for the old.

Innocent, Your Honor. Mercy, Your Honor. Mercy is the basis of true Christianity, Your Honor.

The restless kids to whom Mr. A. had injected his fixes, through layers and layers of retailers. The terribly wise children who had started out quite honestly believing that marijuana was strictly for current kicks and by no means habit forming. And it wasn't, not until marijuana no longer provided the needed kicks, and something a little kickier was needed. The hard stuff had to come next and, naturally, Mr. A. was there to offer it.

It worked, too. It made music sound fine and it made the customers feel big for as long as five whole minutes at a time, and for a while there was a kind of glory to vomiting vomit that wouldn't come in the real jazzbo pot under the bed, and sitting on the toilet seat and waiting for stool that painfully wouldn't release, and in general being such a wonderfully big hot shot, the kind so different from the dummy squares.

I rest my case and I thank you, kind ladies and kind gentlemen of the jury, he had knowingly smiled

so drearily often, always assured of the lovely fact that despite the rules and regulations, the American penalty for dealing in dope was no harsher, really, than serious shoplifting.

He had defended scores of Mr. A.'s employees, wealthy peddlers all, who had been appraised of the ruling that they might serve from five years to life, and had gone free—quite nose-thumbingly free and prepared to return to their lucrative profession of preparing new teen-age drug addicts—in little more than a year.

Financially speaking, it was a grand law. He had served more time than that for killing his wife.

There was something almost deliriously marvelous in knowing that, although you put youngsters on drugs, you could earn millions upon millions of dollars a year. And that if you happened to be caught at it, your penalty would be light. You sometimes read of congressmen in Washington demanding the death sentence for convicted drug peddlers, but happily it never became law. When it did, Mr. A.—and William Remington Kane—would pack their bags, because soon they would be out of business.

3

Kane finished his coffee, excused himself from the still pouting Miss Staples, and padded to the cashier's cage where he saw the waiting Tony Baker. He adjusted his straw hat, nodded felicitously, and led the boy to the back seat of the limousine outside.

"Glad to see you're prompt," he mentioned to Baker as the limousine pulled away. "Mr. A. doesn't approve of inefficiency in little things." Motioning toward the driver, he said, "This young gentleman is Bix. You two might be seeing a bit of each other in the time to come. If you're not too overly careful, that is."

He found the bottle under his seat, uncapped it and brought it to his parched lips. It set up the guaranteed magic again, the kind that never failed to beguile him into his practiced stupor. It was real, more real than the bevy of nose twitching peddlers he had been amply paid to defend.

Bix, a most cunning jivester, peeked backwards through his rear view mirror, and asked, "What're you picking up, man?" It was a language quite beyond the comprehension of Kane, and he contented himself with his magic bottle.

"Whatever you're putting out, Bix," Baker replied, lighting one of those dreadful little cigars. "Just trying to play it cool."

"That's the most, man," Bix enthused, acting far too communicative for one's taste. Kane would have to remember to report it to Mr. A. "Always play it cool," the driver said. "Bix likes it cool."

Steering with one hand, Bix picked up the telephone from the box under the dashboard and briskly announced an authoritative, "Eight-two-four," into the mobile.

Watching Baker reacting to the obvious elegance of a mobile phone in a limousine, Kane discovered himself inordinately pleased. When all was said and done,

Baker was a hick, a corny apple knocker who still could be impressed by something beyond the sleepy activity of the small town.

That was a rather nice note, he thought, for a junkie.

MR. A. luxuriously lighted his second Havana Special of the evening as he sat back in his specially made comfort chair and watched the Cartwright girl vomit on the couch. She'd been doing it ever since he'd arrived, but it was a crazy kind of vomit. Nothing came up. They said that's when the junkies had it really bad; when nothing would come up. He settled back as he waited for the others to show and watched with interest. One thing was sure as hell: she might wrinkle his couch cover a little, but she wouldn't louse up his nice rug.

"You gonna make sense for a minute and let me get you a fix?" he prodded quietly, but sternly enough so that she couldn't help but hear.

Or did she hear? he wondered again. It was an irritating fact to August. He'd been in the big end of the junk business for almost three years now, and he still didn't know for sure how to guarantee the way a junkie would behave at any given time. He would never admit it to anyone, of course, but he was fleetingly ashamed that he knew so little about how his clients conducted themselves. All he really knew, and all that mattered, though, in the nice long run, was that they

needed him. Whether or not they knew him personally—and he made it a business-like point to see to it that he be kept in the background—they needed him as surely as they'd once needed their mama's milk. At the few times when his business had become just a little uncomfortable he'd prided himself on keeping in mind that he was needed. The whole thing was almost as satisfying as the fact that he, poor August Stadtlermann from the poor Wisconsin farm, was a gentleman these days, as much so as the big men uptown who'd been born into the silver spoons. He could buy as many dollar Havanas as he pleased.

The Cartwright broad again refused to answer him, but he played the whole thing patiently. She was doubled up and honest-to-God turning both green and white at the same time, and he supposed he'd never seen anyone act so sick before and still stay so quiet. But he remained patient. He'd taught himself long ago that blowing the top was the luxury for hoods, for small timers who never got anywhere.

Tonight Mr. A., leaning back and drawing the wonderful dollar smoke into his mouth, felt like seventeen million. His business was booming, and he could feel affection for the law, almost. Only this afternoon his gin partner and palsy-walsy competitor Big Ernie had been convicted for wholesaling the main line stuff. It had looked bad for a little while, but Ernie had taken the five year rap like a gent. Chicken feed. Five years was the maximum story. With only the slightest luck, he'd be out again in a hell of a lot less than half that time, back in operation, and with all his dough waiting for him.

The creep of a bleeding heart of a prosecuting attorney had even dragged in the fact that some of Big Ernie's goods had killed a twelve-year-old kid, a squirt whose story shouldn't have even been brought up in the trial. As though Big Ernie, with kids of his own, would ever dream of hurting a twelve-year-old punk! But that was the way those bastards liked to run their trials—hoping your heart would bleed every time a kid was mentioned—and they had their business, the same way Ernie did.

Five year maximum. And a holy-holy lecture from the judge, carrying on like Big Ernie was a nothing, a common thief.

But Ernie had listened to all that crap like a gentleman. Why not? Ernie was class from the word go. Yes sir, life was pretty swell, at that.

When the buzzer sounded from outside and the word came through that Bix had arrived, Mr. A. gave the okay. He got up and stalked to the Cartwright broad for a moment before leaving for the adjoining office where the safe was. She was still writhing and biting hell out of her torn handkerchief, but she still wouldn't play. He asked her still again, but she shook her head.

"Before long, bitch," he advised calmly, "you're gonna beg for that fix. So what's the difference—now or a couple minutes from now? All you got to do is say yes, you'll go live upstate with my other girls. What the hell's so hard to pronounce?"

"I—said—no. . ." she croaked and it must have pained her to get the words out. "I—won't be—a—whore. . ."

The laugh came easily to him. "You're a junkie, ain'cha, kid? Just what the hell else good are you?"

Waiting just a beat, he added, "I'll be in the next room. I got enough sweet fixes there to last you a lifetime, although you don't look like you're gonna last that long. When you're ready for the Big Fix, you know where to find me."

Then he strode out to meet his new customer. He hoped it wouldn't have to take too long. His wife had told him the boy felt like he was coming down with a cold. You couldn't be too careful, this time of year.

2

As Tony sat between Bix and Kane, he couldn't get the sight of Doris Cartwright, lying in agony in the adjoining room, out of his mind. The poor, dumb kid, he thought; how long would it take before Joan replaced her? Young, hip, clever Joan?

Bix had moved out again, to look in on her, as Mr. A. circled Tony, examining him but talking to Kane. Finally he saw the large man coming toward him and ask, "You the new pusher?"

"Call me that, yeah."

"Uh," Mr. A. grunted and kept walking. "J.I. and Jukey say you're good people. They tell me you been throwing gold like you make it yourself."

Tony shrugged, feeling even less comfortable now than when he'd first stepped in. "I take a little, leave a little. . . ."

"You come into Santo Bello like a tornado. Big hefty noise. But what else, huh? What else you got?"

It was time. "I got forty bills and I'm looking for junk. They tell me you're the one who can handle it.

If not, I'm wasting my time and I can connect down South." He remembered to smile inoffensively.

"Easy, boy," the big man instructed, not especially fazed. "Just because you set yourself up with the low balls don't mean you're real good people."

Bix, peeking in at Doris, had come back into the dimly lighted but expensively furnished room and gave signs that he hadn't missed out on a word. "Mr. August always likes to make sure," Bix said. "We had a federal roper tried to ace himself in two years ago." He grinned widely and the space between his front teeth made him look oddly deformed. "When we got through with the nosey bastard, he was too wet to plow."

"Let's drop it," Mr. A. ordered and moved toward Tony. "I checked on you personally, kid," he said and extended his beefy hand. "You're good people. Glad to know you, Baker boy."

Tony accepted it; it was dry and firm. "Same here."

"But I was a little surprised to hear you got busted in Chi for using H."

All of them, even the gradually sleepy-looking Kane, were waiting for his reaction and he was convinced that from here on in he would have to ride it all without the faintest slip. "Oh, that," he declared. "That was strictly left field reporting. I was only joy popping. I'm no big habit man."

The air must have cleared. Mr. A. retreated a little, allowed himself a grin, and announced, "Bix, give everybody a pop. And give the little lady in the next room a fix, too, if she's ready to cooperate." Bix hustled to get behind the bar and slid back a wall panel. He

drew out a jewel case and took some bindles, caps of heroin, and four sterile syringes.

The meeting was really getting under way, Tony thought. Furtively he glanced around him. Kane was poised on his chair, frowning for all to see that he disapproved of everything in the room, but abruptly gawking in fascination, nevertheless.

"Help yourself, Baker boy," said Mr. A. in a voice that dared considerably more than it invited.

"Man, you sure got some nifty looking joints in there," Tony remarked admiringly.

"Nothing but the best." And suddenly the voice was flat and damning.

Then Bix was hard at work, rolling up his sleeve and preparing his own needle. Mr. A. stared hard at Tony, intent on knowing whether the bluff was about to be met. Tony went through the preparations with casual movements, as though he'd done it before time and time again, but the growing sweat was nearly visible at his forehead. When the very last moment for stalling had run out, Mr. A. growled, "Okay, Baker boy. We're waiting for you."

Kane must have felt some of the tension, too. He rose discreetly and intoned, "Well, I don't want to spoil anybody's fun. I think I'll get on my merry old way home, if you gentlemen will excuse me."

"Sure," Mr. A. said. "Who the hell needs you?"

It was at this now-or-never moment when Tony partially realized why the training period had been so damnedly exhaustive, not only for weeks and weeks but, worse, for hours upon hours upon hours of repetition and more repetition, playacting the deadly prep-

aration so that there couldn't be the hint of a slipup. He needed this one free moment now, this one jealous moment when they would focus on Kane.

They supplied him with it, he hoped. Only seconds passed as they observed the jittery Kane making his way toward the door, followed by the horrendously obscene scream of Doris Cartwright bouncing unannouncedly against the walls, but he prayed he could make use of it. He reached for the tiny rubber ball in his pocket and palmed it in the crook of his elbow. Desperately fast, he shot the heroin into the ball and greedily replaced it in the pocket. He had done it seventy-seven times during the course before the chief had told him he'd done it really well.

Now he surveyed the eyes of Bix and the big man, searching for a report. He couldn't be sure. Kane was on his way down the hall by now, and Doris was screaming louder than ever, and the faces of the two men returning his look began to soften. But still he couldn't be perfectly sure.

As he placed the emptied syringe back into the box, he said, "How about your pop?" and trusted that his voice would hold up without betraying him.

Mr. A. sat again and lighted a dead cigar. "We were just giving you the final exam," he informed. "You passed."

"Crazy, Mr. A."

"I never took a fix and never will," the big man announced, throwing his syringe into the box. "I sell wholesale to hophead pushers. The minute I ever decided to become a clunkhead enough to take a shot,

the real big boys would goose me out of business, and they'd have every gawddamn right in the world to do it, too." He winked at Bix as the noise from the adjoining room lowered and gradually silenced. Then: "You ever know a hype you could trust?"

"No," Tony remarked, shaking his head. "No, I guess not."

"If the kids want it, fine," Bix reported. "If they don't, then we get some other kids to pass the word around that they're chicken. That's a magic word, chicken. The more kids get hooked, the better for business. But no junkie, young or old, gets into the big time rackets. And that's never going to happen."

Tony regarded Mr. A. "How come you let *me* take a shot?"

"Who said you were big time?" he countered. "You're a big customer, nothing more. You try to rat on me, then it's the word of a junkie against me, and I'm a solid citizen. I got no marks. I'm clean as hell. But you're gonna wind up like that bitch in there," he notified philosophically. Then he folded his hands across his massive chest and inquired, "Okay, what do you want to buy, and how much?"

"Two ounces of pure white."

The big man peered at him. "That'll cost you a lot of bread, Baker boy."

"I'm ready."

"Okay," Mr. A. nodded after a short pause. "Pay Bix. We'll call you later and tell you when to pick up the stash."

"No good," Tony stressed, rising for the first time. "First I see the stash, and then you get my bread. I

think I made it clear to Breckenridge that I'm not in this game for love letters and valentines. Or didn't he lay the facts on you straight? I told you, Mr. A., or whatever the hell letter you are, I got contacts down South frothing to grab a little of my trade. I've had enough of your cracker barrel philosophies about big time and small time, as a matter of fact. If I got to pass every lousy cheap test you pitch at me, then I'd rather deal with slobs who act like gents."

"Smart boy," Mr. A. remarked, unruffled. "It'll be four G's."

"High cost of living or something?"

"Bix, you got his phone number. Baker, we'll call you in an hour. Now cut out."

Still posing his readiness for more battle, Tony left the room slowly. Once outside, he filled his lungs with air. It was close to devastating to realize that the close calls had very probably only just begun.

3

He cruised along the quiet, sleepy neighborhood until he found the corner he wanted. He pulled to the curb, parked and waited for only a minute or two before the other car parked several yards behind him. He looked through his rear view mirror, recognized Willard Burroughs, and got out. He walked easily to it and stepped into the rear seat as the door opened for him. He had met the two plainclothesmen up front earlier and nodded to them.

"How are you, Sam?" Burroughs asked, genuinely interested.

"Fine," he answered, "but when do we get to something simple, like fighting off an army of enemy tanks with our bare hands?"

"As soon as Higgins called, I alerted everyone. We've got Mr. A's place staked out with most of our men. Two teams are covering Kane. Higgins is staying on at The Drag. About all I can say now is to watch yourself. This is a bad bunch."

"Still want me to tape the buy?"

"Yes, if you can, the Police Commissioner replied and stuck out his hand. "And good luck, Sam. That's a hell of a weak thing to say to a guy, isn't it?"

"Thanks, anyway, sir," he said and smiled wryly. "After all this, I'll have to take another training course—to learn how to behave like a guy again instead of an animal."

He was reaching exhaustion by the time he had returned home to wait for the call. If anyone had suggested to him a little over a year ago that he would be doing this work that bordered on the cloak and dagger, instead of plunging on toward his law degree, he would have offered the respectable raspberries. He had come back home from Korea a sobered but still trustful young man named Sam Graham, always just a little underweight for his height and perpetually and rather embarrassingly looking at least five years younger than he actually was. He had cheated the completion of his college career first by war and then by taking a series of full-time jobs, for the simple reason that there wasn't enough money to go around at home and his mother and kid brother needed someone to help pay the rent. There had been the silent gripes, of course,

but not for long; Pop had been dead for eleven years, Joey was getting big, and Mother wasn't well. Rushing back to college to become Clarence Darrow would have been crazy, with money at the house so awfully hard to come by.

The routine of working by day and studying by night had ended abruptly only when Joey had died, so swiftly and mysteriously that the inquests had seemingly gone on forever.

Finally it had come out: Joey had heard himself called 'chicken' once too often and had joined the other kids in marijuana parties. When the effects of the sticks had worn off, as they'd naturally done, he gritted his teeth when they yapped 'chicken' again, and had gone main line to show them he was a man.

Joey had proved himself to be a man, all right, all fourteen years of him, all big wheel and hot shot of him. Before long he'd required thirty-five dollars a day to feed his habit. When it became clear that he couldn't make it, he'd gone berserk. A final overdose of H had done the job skillfully and had buried him.

One pusher was picked up, a cologned dandy who admitted to having supplied Joey once or twice but who refused to name any names. He'd received a one year sentence. Amidst an occasional bottom of the page editorial asking for a strong law with firmer teeth, and amidst other editorials gently suggesting that those involved in dope for profit were not criminals so much as they were neurotic souls in need of tender psychotherapy, Joey's cologned pusher was back on the streets and in luxurious business after four restful months in jail. The pokey's gatekeeper had even

shaken his hand and congratulated him on getting out.

Sam Graham hadn't been satisfied, and had checked to see what he could do. The Chief had sent for him then, had made him go through rigorous tests, and had taken three full months before handing him the first assignment and the name of Tony Baker.

Settling back in the chair, massaging his eyes, he turned on the small desk lamp and took the tape recorder out of his pocket. He heard his own voice say, "Crazy, Mr. A.," and the big man's voice, growl, "I never took a fix and never will. The minute I ever decided to become a clunkhead enough to take a shot. . ." before he noticed the glow of cigarette sparks near his bed.

Sharply he switched off the recorder and stood. The voice saying, "What won't they think of next? No bedroom should be without one," belonged to Joan Staples.

He flicked the ceiling light. Joan was lying on his bed. Her skirt was rucked back. There was a stick of marijuana between her fingers and she seemed indestructably happy.

4

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Joan appeared to be terribly pleased with herself. She took a leisurely drag and proclaimed, "What's the hot and heavy beef, baby? I got tired of waiting by my lonesome, that's all. Any crime? You gonna phone Gangbusters?"

"I didn't tell you you could come up here," he ob-

jected, burning to know exactly how much she knew, how much she wanted to know.

She giggled, "Man, I've been hung up like a junior flip. It's for sure the weirdest thing, you know?"

"What if my aunt comes home?"

"Hey, that Mr. A.," she drawled, ignoring the question, "is that the same Mr. A. from The Drag, the man who makes so pretty with the trumpet? And why do you have to record it? Don't you people trust anybody? Jukey doesn't trust me for five stinking dollars and you don't trust the man who sells to you." She sat up, resting her elbows against the bed. "Hey, tell me the truth, Tony. Is Mr. A. from The Drag, or is he? How many chances do I get to guess?"

More than tense now, he snapped, "Lay off it, Joan! Be a big girl. Stop goofing off!"

She hit her head a couple of times with the palm of her hand. "Hey," she kidded, "I must be going deaf. I thought I heard the almighty Tony Baker say for me to stop blasting, even in private." She swung her pretty legs over the side of the bed and pleaded, "No more jokes, baby, okay? Kiss me. Pretty please. . . ?"

There was nothing else to do but to reach back when she reached out for him. Tony met her arms and lowered to her, letting her seize his hands in hers to draw him closer to her. Her mouth lifted hungrily. It was one hell of a time to be conscious of tape recorders, he knew, but he was soon keenly aware of his on the desk. How much had she really heard? How much did she really know?

As he gently broke free she whispered, "Something bugging you, Daddio?"

"Uh—not now, doll," he countered. "I got business. It's—well, it's a real drag like right now, but I've got to cut out."

She didn't size up as being nearly angered enough. "Aren't we even going to listen to that cute tape recorder?" she urged blandly.

"That's just some crazy stuff I recorded back in Chicago."

"What do you say we call J.I. and the other cats and play that recorded jive?" she offered impishly, still not quite letting him go. "Let's have a ball, Daddio."

Hesitating for a moment, he knew he would have to play it differently. He freed himself, got to his feet, and advised, "Dig you, doll. Stay put. I'll make a couple of calls and we'll really have ourselves a swinging session. Right?"

As he headed for the door he heard her call, "Don't take too long!"

At the telephone in the hall, Tony flipped through the pages of the phone book, bursting to find Alice Williams' number in a hurry. He was just about to dial it when the phone rang, with an unusually loud insistence, and he lifted the receiver to hear Bix's grating voice. He promised to meet him on Corsica in fifteen minutes.

By the time he heard Alice Williams' strained voice, he wasn't sure if he could make her understand. He told her that he needed her help, and immediately, that it wasn't a gag. She had to believe him, that he couldn't explain now, that he was home, that if she had any doubts at all, she should call Police Commissioner Burroughs as soon as he hung up. "Joan Staples is

/

here," he whispered into the mouthpiece. "Can you come right away? The longer you think about it, the rougher it'll be all around. If you ever believed in me, Alice, now's the time to do it!" He promised that he would leave the front door open and asked her to do her best to keep Joan from leaving.

When he thought he heard a foreign noise, he begged her once more to trust him, and replaced the receiver.

The noise was not imagined. It belonged to his Aunt Gwen who had weaved in through the front door. Seeing her materialize was a pleasanter sight than seeing Mr. A. or any of the assortment of goons, perhaps. But on the other hand maybe he'd been rash. Gwen was cockeyed drunk.

"Hyah, kiddo-kiddo-kid," she grinned. "Gimme the good word, quick."

"Gwen," he whispered hoarsely, grabbing her, fearful that she was about ready to dive into instant unconsciousness. "Listen to me. Sober up; this is very important. Joan Staples is in my room. I want you to keep her there. It's important to Burroughs."

She blinked at him. "Yup," she nodded agreeably. "Yup and double yup. Gonna do my duty," she promised, saluting patriotically only a moment before she caved in and fell to the nearest chair, apparently dead to the world.

Suddenly the only great enemy was time, and he had no time of his own to make an unfixed match. He could look through the curtains at the front door and see the familiar car waiting for him. He snatched a final glance at the sleeping Gwen and darted out. Bix grinned sweetly at him.

"I decided to pick you up, Baker," he informed off-handedly. "You might not be able to find our new drop, being so new to the city and all. Hop in."

5

From the opposite side of the residential, shadowy street, J.I. watched Alice Williams hurry into Baker's house. He waited a few minutes and then nodded to Jukey Jarrow. "Now we go," he directed.

They had no trouble in getting upstairs and into the one lighted room. Joan, the lettuceheaded bitch, looked blind from too much blasting. The school marm was there with her and Joan was laying it on to her about how much she needed a blast, when he and Jarrow entered.

"You both behave and hold tight," he instructed, "or you both get hurt, and bad." He glared at Joan. "First of all, you tell me why you're here."

Mrs. Williams, obviously doing her best to hold in the fear, ordered them both to get out, but J.I. snapped, "After she tells us a few things; then we'll see." Again letting Joan know by his eyes that he meant business, he demanded, "Well? Come up with some answers."

"No, not to you," the blonde answered suddenly, slyly. She faced J.I. squarely and nearly knocked his head off with, "Not even to Mr. A. . ."

So that was it, he thought, recovering from the name before Jukey did. She knew. She, and that cruddy Baker. And the school marm. And, by now, maybe the whole damn world. The hunches had been right all

along, and now it was roosting time, and in triple spades.

She was playing it coy, way in and unstraight, like she was holding all the trump cards in her bra. "You mean about Mr. A.?" she teased, wriggling restlessly on the narrow bed. Enraged, he bounded for her, yanked her to her feet and squeezed his fingers around her arms. "What do you know about Mr. A.?" he demanded, shaking her till she came on like Jello. Yellow Jello.

The school teacher was yakking that she'd call the police, but Jukey took care of her with a drawling, "Look, Mrs. Williams, we know you're a square. Don't be too square, though, 'cause it gets unhealthy, dig?"

J.I. cursed her and warned that another word would get her gagged. He slapped Joan and bellowed, "I said, what do you know about Mr. A.?"

Rubbing the welt, she started to plead with him. "I'm thin, J.I.," she whined. "Buy me a stick from Jukey and maybe I'll tell you."

He studied her fiercely and decided the time for wasting had been long since over. Holding his hand out toward Jukey, he snapped his fingers. He accepted the marijuana, clamped it into the broad's hand and repeated the question, prepared now to spill her hemp-infested brains all over the cornball rug if she kept toying.

But she was ready to play. "Tony's a very close friend of Mr. A.," she giggled, reaching over to Baker's table for a book of matches, "even if Tony doesn't trust him."

"What the hell does that mean in English?"

"Well, if you trust someone," she remarked glibly, "do you always take along a little tape recorder, to check the deal you made?"

As the news bounced off Jarrow and made him let out a little-girl gasp, J.I. slapped the reefer out of her mouth and cuffed the side of his hand hard against her neck. "I don't believe you!" he cried, grasping her and shaking her violently, believing nothing any more but believing what she had just said, believing it too implicitly to ever want to let her go again. She was struggling to break away from him, forcing herself to dart for the stick, screaming hysterically as he lunged at her, beating her, aching to be assured that it wasn't true, that she was just another hophead cutting in on the smooth way his life had to coast. He was J.I. Breckenridge and there was nobody bigger. He couldn't finish up this way with the cushiest deal of his life going smash. He was Breckenridge and everyone had said from the time he could piece words together that he was going to be big, big as life, bigger than his father. His infuriated hands pummeled at her for telling him the miserable truth, the crappy untruthful truth, and he could hear all the loud wheels going round and round. And Mrs. Williams was fighting her way through Jukey and Jukey was as lost as he was.

When he slowly became aware of the teacher's penetrating shouts he pushed the kid aside and stalked toward her. "You're going to make the grade, Jerome," she had told him in class. "You debate well in class and that's the first indication of leadership. Your father won several Leadership Awards, I've heard. He was a kind of saint here in Santa Bello, wasn't he? I've seen that

bust of him in front of the library. You must get all your qualities from him. . . .”

Like all the others. From the time he could remember. Replica of your father. Father. Father. Father. J.I. Breckenridge, the conquering hero, the man who made the mountains move when he walked. Never himself; always his father's son. His towering, overwhelming, gawddamn heroic father's son. She'd said it, too. She was a stranger to Santa Bello, but it hadn't taken her long to learn what to say. Father. Father. Your father. . . .

He could feel the steel building in his fists. His fists, his own fists. His strength was more powerful than anybody's, anybody's at all, and when he flung her and heard the painful thud of her head against the wall, when he saw her slump to the floor unconscious, there was the surge of pleasure that blasted at him, coming at him hard like the force of a cleft rock. He had shut her up. By himself. All alone. And his father would have been ashamed of him. And that made it all the better. . . .

Watching her, it took a moment to unravel and hear Jarrow's creaky voice behind him. Then he heard a woman's voice—not Joan's and for sure as hell not the school marm's—and he wheeled. It took a second or two to recognize the battered old crone who stood in the doorway, carrying on like a hoocher and holding a bottle of the hooch in her hand, poising it as if it were a baseball bat. Then he knew her: Mrs. Dulaine, Baker's aunt. A boozing biddy who occasionally turned out for the flower shows his mother gave up at the Armory every September. “You must be nice to her,

darling, even if she isn't our kind," his mother had whispered to him. You must be kind. You must always be kind.

He scanned Jarrow. Jukey, the real cool hot shot who was a dynamo when it came to talking but who was turning out to be a kid sister when the big chips were down. Jarrow, one of Mr. A.'s loyalty men, the cat who admitted that he claimed his fattest kicks from turning eleven and twelve year olds on. Jarrow was standing there only inches away from the old bat, bulging his eyes in fright like he was all set to dirty his pants.

"What're you punks up to?" the crone screeched, and he couldn't be sure if she was crocked or dead levelling. He caught Jukey's imploring eye and nodded. Jukey made the first step, but not in time. The old bag lifted the bottle and, swinging wildly, broke it over his head.

"I want my father," Joan Staples moaned as J.I. rushed to kick the old dame to the floor. "Oh, please God, where is my father, don't let them do this to me. . . . Oh, please God, help me. . . ."

Nothing mattered now nearly so much as to take over, to take over so completely and masterfully that even Mr. A. would learn about it and would call him in personally to let him know how invaluable he was. He knelt and shook Jukey. "You all right?" he cried. "What the hell are you, a chicken?"

"I—" Jarrow faltered, managing to sit up at the accusation, shaking his head dully.

"Listen to me and listen fast, you chicken," J.I. rasped, forcing him to stand. "The whole gawddamn jig

is up unless we get smart in a hurry and protect ourselves. You *with* me, Jarrow? Otherwise our party's over and it means we meet the fuzz for real!"

The worrisome pause was short. "Yeah, sure. Okay, J.I. Only come back quick, will you? I'm—hell, I don't know. Maybe I'm like scared."

J.I. rushed to the telephone downstairs and dialed his number. As he waited for his connection, he paced as far as the cord would let him and noticed a pussycat sitting wide awake on its paws in a deep armchair. The cat blinked and returned his look.

The armchair wasn't very far from the phone. But J.I. would have had to put the receiver down in order to pet her. He wished he could pet her. She looked like the kind of cat who would purr if he did.

TONY FOLLOWED BIX into The Drag and caught Higgins' eye almost immediately. Mr. A., up on the bandstand, saw them enter and nodded to one of the members of the combo to take over *One O'clock Jump*. He stepped down and reached for a cigar, pausing for only a minute to swell up as a teen-age girl gushed over how great he was on a trumpet.

Tony inspected the tight front quarters as meaningfully as possible in the short time that carried him from the vestibule to the kitchen of the club. He detected Steve Bentley of the Rangers who detected him back, and thought fleetingly that it would be one hell of a helpful thing if he could find an acknowledged cube such as Bentley on his team when it counted.

He lighted a cigarillo for Higgins' benefit as he kept walking. Tonight, he reminded himself, anything counted.

In the kitchen Mr. A. appeared, told the short order cook to beat it, and asked for the money. There was a rancid smell pervading the surprising large kitchen, an odd smell which Tony felt would follow him through nights even longer than tonight.

Mr. A. stood impatiently behind the food counter.

Bix zigzagged impatiently between one and the other. Crazy, Tony discovered himself becoming conscious of the paper on the long counter that read in a pencilled scrawl, "*Bread: 1 doz. loaves.*" Equally as crazily, he wondered if the short order cook had written it.

"I'm asking for money," Mr. A. asserted.

"And I'm asking for the stuff," said Tony, purposely slipping his hands into his pockets.

Mr. A. held out his hand and rasped, "Pay the man." The turning back period was in the distant past and Tony brought the bills from his wallet. He counted out four thousand dollars.

"The brick above Bix's right shoulder is loose," Mr. A. directed, pocketing the money, appearing a little more relieved. "Help yourself."

As the wall phone rang faintly, Tony smiled, "You sure play it careful, don't you?" He kept an eye on Bix lumbering toward the phone as he removed the loose brick and pulled out the half kilo in the plastic bag. Bix was busy at the phone, too busy for Tony's taste; the eyes drifted suspiciously from the phone to Tony and back to the phone again before he replaced the receiver.

There was hardly less than a beat before Bix exclaimed, "Mr. A. That was J.I.!"

"So?"

"So he tells me. This creep's the phoniest bastard in life! My God, Mr. A., do somethin', fast!"

"Roll up your sleeve," Mr. A. ordered curtly, bringing a pistol from his pocket and training it in a way which suggested he knew precisely how to use it.

"You heard him," Bix hissed. "Roll."

The combo in the front room had just begun on an intricate version of *Where or When?*

When Tony, standing rigid, refused to move, the large man gave the signal and Bix produced a switchblade. Extending it ominously he advanced only the necessary three or four steps and ripped open both of Tony's shirt sleeves, vigorously enough to find the wiring of the pocket tape recorder on Tony's left arm.

"Okay?" Bix asked knowingly.

The big man's voice was deadly as he instructed, "Tell the band to play a loud one."

Glaring, Bix spat at Tony as he nodded and padded out of the kitchen. The moment was dangerously suspended and all Tony could think to say was, "Maybe we can make a deal."

"Grab a wrong move, Baker boy," Mr. A. stressed, "and I won't wait for the loud music."

2

Higgins watched the fat little guy named Bix rush with an obvious message toward the bandstand and knew it was time to move. He hurried to Steve Bentley, bent low and confided, "Walter Burroughs said that if I needed any help, I could depend on you." Bentley frowned at him, pretending ignorance, and Higgins said, "I'm Herb Higgins. Police Department." When it worked, when Bentley hit back with an immediately understanding nod of agreement, Higgins added, "Mr. A. and Bix are pushers. If you see Tony, try and help

him. He's working with us and there may be some trouble."

Then he headed for the bandstand. He hoped he'd learned his timing.

Tony edged imperceptibly in the kitchen toward the door, clutching the plastic bag to his side. There was an utter dependence on the fact that Mr. A. was blinded by anger enough to be unable to judge distance with any sure accuracy. But he was wrong. The large man, bulky with hate, raised his gun and roared, "Don't move."

"The police know I'm here," Tony said evenly, praying that the unnecessary talk might cover his moves. "You're smarter than these other cruds, aren't you? You know it'll mean a murder rap for you."

"*Selling* to the kid chumps can cut into my day, too, so what's the difference?" Mr. A. scorched, aiming his gun perfectly. "I said not to move!"

Tenaciously holding his breath, Tony waited for the music to beam in louder before he kicked backward against the kitchen door and flung the loose heroin into the man's face. Mr. A. fired, but it was a wild shot as the sharp blinding deflected his aim. Tony didn't wait. Scrambling into the main room, he lunged for the cover of the nearest table. The next expected shot came but whizzed past him and splintered the table.

The female screams and male shouts coursed over the club as people scampered for safety. The combo's frantically piercing music lowered and died out as The Drag became a shambles of hysterics.

Bix, momentarily frozen with alarm, dug for his Luger and leapt off the bandstand, fighting to draw a bead

on Tony through the panic stricken crowd. He heard, "Drop it!" and whirled to catch sight of the waiter pointing an automatic straight at his head. Cursing, he fired and watched the waiter drop, saw the automatic skitter out of the waiter's hand.

There was an oppressive silence until someone screamed, then the club erupted with new panic as Tony tried to crawl the teasingly few yards forward toward Pat Higgins' gun; part of the crowd scattered for the doors. In the confusion Tony dove to the next table, overturned it, reaching still vainly for the gun. The room felt darker, hotter, and he knew that neither Bix nor Mr. A. was planning to make any quick break away. He was only too conscious of the desperation in Bix's struggle to find him. But he became sharply aware, too, of something new, something totally unexpected.

Not all of the Santa Bello kids had screamed and made a run for it, although the front door was wide open and invitingly persuasive. At least a dozen of them, some, including Bentley, he could instantly recognize, some who meant nothing to him, girls and boys both, had remained, and for a crazy, giddy moment he wondered if they were the same thrill-nutty blood seekers from the sidelines of Clarkstar Strip. Then the glimmer pushed through: somehow, they were with him. Beyond all the wacky sideburns and wackier talk and inverted values, they were kids with guts, and they were with him.

Higgins' automatic was so terribly close as one table behind him turned over, then another and then still another. Bix was stalking toward him, apparently con-

vinced that Tony was unarmed, and had levelled his gun directly at Tony's head when a bottle winged through the air and cracked against his shoulder. Bix fired, but his determination receded and his eyes bulged at the army of kids facing him from across the room. A strange, oddly feminine sound of panic escaped from his throat as he worked to edge toward Mr. A., who suddenly materialized from the kitchen and stood facing Tony.

The barrage began then from the Santa Bello kids—a barrage of bottles, decanters, silverware, even girls' shoes, all thrown at Bix and Mr. A., most of them managing to connect. The two pinned together, reeling under their rage and insult, as Tony's fingers touched the gun. Another volley of fire lighted up the room as Mr. A. blasted shots, one of them barely missing Tony. Tony lurched back, rolling over on his back, and looked up to witness the more potent weapons from the Santa Bello army. One table lamp whizzed past his head and smashed against Mr. A.'s stomach. The gun dropped and Tony knew it was time.

The yells were deafening. They all advanced now, swarming over Bix as Tony rose to find himself nearly face to face with Mr. A.

The meeting had been a long time in coming.

"Easy, punk," the bulky man warned, not retreating an inch. "I have brave bastards like you for lunch every day."

Tony tensed. Behind him, the gang seemed to sense that he wanted the big boy for himself. They concentrated all their energy on Bix as they continued to pummel him with a still new barrage of shoes and cups

and silverware. Clutching his hands over his head, Eix was crying. "Mr. A.!" he wept, "stop 'em! O God, Mr. A., take care o' me, I can't—"

"You heard me, you crud," Mr. A. demanded, biting off the words, his face dark and riddled with hate. Pulling back, he drew a knife from his pocket, an obscenely huge switchblade, and roared, "You lousy son of a bitch. *You gonna ruin me? You?* Crap up what I been workin' for so long? You dirty stinkin'—"

But he lunged an instant too late. Tony reared and kicked the knife out of his hand, sending it soaring into the bowels of the club.

"Give me some more speeches about your business, Mr. A.," Tony cried. "Let me hear more about your business."

"An offer," the big man muttered hoarsely, evidently aware now that time wasn't his friend any longer. "I give you an offer and we both be grown up about this. I got loot. You lay off and get smart and I got cash right here in the club that's yours. You take it all, my word's good, an' you lay off and get smart, huh, kid?"

"I don't need money," Tony said. "Why do I need to get smart?"

"I said get *smart!*" the man cried, suddenly fearful, stepping back and lifting his huge hands. "I'm a solid citizen. Clean as hell. My family don't know nothin' about me. Listen, you believe in God, don'cha? I got a boy. Eight years old. I'd die for that kid. He's my whole life. He's sick tonight. I gotta get home, see him, make him well." The words were rushing together faster.

"Don't cause me trouble, kid. I never did nothing to you. I love my boy. Lemme alone, don't let him know about me. Don't louse me up, kid. . . ."

Tony bore in, crashing the hardest right of his life into the big man's belly, and the picture of his brother Joey was vividly clear in his mind. More racked with hate now than he had ever let it touch him before, he raised his hand and hacked the killer over the back of the neck.

The hatred refused to abate even as Mr. A. doubled up and fell to the floor. "Killer!" Tony shouted and kicked his shoe into the big man's head. "Killer! Killer!" He continued to shout it, even after Steve Bentley and some of the others had yanked him back.

Clots of blood had begun to dry on Mr. A.'s face later as the police cars and ambulance announced themselves shrilly outside. White coated men hurried in and carried out a conscious and Irish-grinning Pat Higgins on a stretcher.

They returned to collect a cowed, weeping Bix.

They saved Mr. A. till last.

Sam Graham rid himself of Tony Baker forever. Walking slowly toward the front door, he saw Walter Burroughs who grabbed his hand. "How are you, Sam?" the Commissioner asked.

"I'm all right," he answered quietly. "Except for one thing. I wanted to ask Mr. A. if he ever knew my brother Joey."

"How's that?"

"No, I guess it sounds screwy. He's here in California and my brother died in Illinois, so I suppose

they never met." He paused for a moment. "But they did meet, at that. The world's not that big. Everybody will say I'm off my rocker, but I'm sure they met."

3

Sam Graham was only days away from beginning a new assignment in Nevada when he was called back to testify at the Santa Bello trials. Alice Williams met his plane. She had grown prettier, somehow, in the few months since the messy morning when he'd crashed her English class and thrown the abusive wolf whistle at her. And she looked at him in a way vastly different from the way any of his real English teachers had ever looked at him. It had quite a bit to do with the fact that they had exchanged air mail letters and impulsively timed telephone calls from the night he had left, calls and letters that promised they would know one another again, and without the party masks.

"I'm almost waiting for you to drive two hundred miles an hour and call me 'doll' in the bargain," she said after he'd taken the wheel.

"I'm straining for the bop, Alice," he answered, taking her hand in his, "but when you dig down deep, you find I couldn't be more of a cube."

"A cube is a new fangled square, isn't it?" she teased.

"New fangled is exactly the right word."

He was told outcome after outcome within the next hectic day. Joan Staples had begged her parents to be parents, not buddies, and there were indications that she was on her way to straightening out. Jukey Jarrow and Bix had each been given a one-to-five year sen-

tence. Their attorneys had publically wept over their youth, but the sentences had stood.

J. I. Breckenridge's mother had hired an attorney and had insisted that all the stops be pulled in his defence. She had demanded a voice of her own: "My son has made straight A's from the day I first enrolled him in school. He is brilliant, in the ways his beloved father was brilliant. He is not common, he is not riff raff. He embarked on a childhood prank which all of us regret, I'm sure, but there is absolutely no reason in the world why he should be herded in with juvenile delinquents and treated so abominably. He is, after all, Jerome Breckenridge's son. Do you hear me, gentlemen—Jerome Breckenridge's son! That must stand for something!"

J. I. received a one-to-five.

Comparatively, Mr. A. was luckier. Sparing no expense, he called in a battery of lawyers from New York to defend him after a swift heart attack suddenly killed William Remington Kane. Mr. A. had seen to it that Kane's funeral was the biggest and most expensive one that Southern California had ever known outside Hollywood.

"As you judge, Your Honor," the chief New York lawyer had summed up, "let me pray that you not forget August Stadtlermann's remarkable devotion to charity. My colleague has attempted to picture him as a villain, but we know him differently. Dedicated to God and his adorable invalid son, whom we affectionately join in calling Sonny, August Stadtlermann is a truly Christian soul who wishes only to repent. I need only remind Your Honor again that with his tears, the

defendant proves he is human and therefore exquisitely equipped to return to his rightful place in humanity. Forgiveness, Your Honor. Ah, forgiveness. . . .”

Mr. A. was awarded a three minute lecture and five years in jail.

Within the decorum of the court, even after the wrist slapping sentence had been meted out, Sam Graham rebelled.

“A second story man gets five years!” he yelled. “Why does a murderer get no more?”

The judge rapped his gavel.

“The man has been convicted of merchandising in dope, of knowingly contributing to the slow murders of scores and scores and scores of human beings! Why is he treated so lightly? What is there in this law that makes the dope seller more of a gentleman than the man who robs to pay his rent? Why isn’t he put in the gas chamber? For the love of God, won’t somebody tell me why?”

Sam Graham was ruled out of order.

Outside, the morning breezes were pleasant. Kids would graduate soon to Santa Bello High bore down on their tricycle wheels and agreed to a race to the corner.

The afternoon papers would predict rain.

The New Dictionary of American Slang

Compiled by Albert Zugsmith

BENNIES: Benzedrine pills

BLOW THIS JOINT: Leave

BREAD: Money

BREAK IT OFF: Stop talking

BUG: Annoy

CAPS: Heroin

CHECK THE CHARACTER:

Look at the man

CHICKENED OUT: Reneged

CHUCK HORRORS: Withdrawal pains

COKE: Cocaine

COOL IT, CATS!: Stop the noise, kids!

COOL RODS: Good cars

COP A SNEAK: Surreptitious look

DO YOU HAVE ANY WEED TO TORCH UP ON?: Do you have any marijuana cigarettes to be lit?

DRAG AND EAT PAD: Restaurant

FITS IN WITH THE BEAT:

Applies to the situation

FIX: Heroin injection

FLIP YOUR WIG: Get excited

FUZZ: Police

GIVE ME AN INTRO TO THIS SNAKE, AND I'LL HITCH UP THE REINDEERS FOR YOU: Introduce me to this despicable person, and I'll get the marijuana cigarettes for you to smoke

GIVE ME A CHANCE TO SCORE: Give me an opportunity to succeed

GOOD PEOPLE: The Right Kind

GOOF BALLS: Benzedrine

GOOFING OFF: Shirking the job

GRAZE ON SOME GRASS: Smoke marijuana

GREEN STUFF: Money

H: Heron

HARD NOSE: Heartless person

HARD STUFF: Heroin

HENCHMEN: Allies, friends, fellow conspirators

HOP IN MY KEMP AND TAKE OFF FOR THE CASBAH: Get

in my car and go to
Lovers' Lane

I DON'T SOUND YOU: I don't
understand you

I GOT YOUR SIGNAL CLEAR
AND COOL: I understand
you perfectly

I WANT TO SCORE: I want to
accomplish or succeed

I WAS ON A CRUISE TO THE
BIG TOWN: Went to the
city

IF SHE DON'T BAKE, SHE
DON'T GET DUSTED: If she
doesn't pay, she doesn't
get any narcotics

IF YOU FLAKE AROUND WITH
THE WEED, YOU LAND UP
USING THE BIG STUFF: If
you use marijuana, you
wind up using heroin

I'LL LET THE AIR OUT OF
YOU: I'll knife you

I'LL SPELL IT OUT FOR YOU:
I'll give you the details

I'M CLEAN: I don't have any
marijuana cigarettes

I'M DRY: I need a mari-
juana cigarette

I'M DYING TO BLAST: I want
to smoke a marijuana
cigarette very badly

I'VE GOT THE GOLD TO TAKE
HER FOR A TRIP ON CLOUD
NINE: I have the money
to buy marijuana for
both of us

KICKING THE HABIT: With-
drawing from use of nar-
cotics

LAY A DEUCE ON ME: Loan
me two dollars

LAY IT DOWN AND PICK IT
UP: Give and take

MAKES ME FRANTIC: Gives
me a laugh

MARY JANE: Marijuana
cigarette

ONION PEELER: Switchblade

PARKING PET: Girl friend

PLAY IT COOL: Be cautious;
be smart

PUSHING THE STUFF: Selling
narcotics

RUMBLE: Argument

SCHMO-BEAU FROM KO-KO-
MO: Small town boy

SCORE: Succeed

SHE'S THE MOST: She's the
greatest

SIZE UP THIS TOWNSVILLE:
Look over the city

SOAP OPERAS: Sad Stories

SOUND THE BOYS OUT: Ask
the boys

SQUARE: Unsophisticated

STICK: Marijuana cigarette

STUD: Man

SWITCHING CHANNELS:
Changing the story

**TIN EARS STRICTLY AROUND
THE BLOCK:** Unsophisti-
cated people

**THAT'S THE WAY THE BONGO
BINGLES:** That's the
story; that's the way it
goes

TOUGH TOENAILS: It's just
too bad

TURN ME ON: Introduce me
to narcotics

TURN ON: Smoke mari-
juana

WEED: Marijuana cigarette

WEEDHEAD: Marijuana
smoker

**WHY DON'T WE CUT OUT TO
YOUR PAD?:** Why don't

we go to your place or
joint?

**YOU AND MARY JANE ARE
GOING STEADY:** You are
using marijuana ciga-
rettes

**YOU DIG THAT SQUARE BIT
ABOUT COLUMBUS?:** You
understand that old-
fashioned story about
Columbus?

YOU PULVERIZE ME: I think
you're very funny

YOU WITH IT?: Do you
understand?

**YOU'RE DRAGGIN' YOUR REAR
AXLE IN WALTZ TIME:**
You're slow

YOU'RE NOT TUNED IN: You
don't understand

YOU'RE WAY OUT: You're
far afield, or off base

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